Keeper

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Monastery, Novgorod

The year was Iesus. 350

In Novgorod the Great, far within the eastern breadth of Tartaria's empire, the old monastery crouched behind its walls like a patient stone animal—dark timbers, pale limewash, and roofs that caught the river wind and groaned softly through the nights. Snow still clung in shaded corners of the yard, though the days had begun to soften. Inside, the monastery held its own season: perpetual dusk, the steady scent of wax and dust, ink and old leather.

Brother Dmitri the Keeper sat alone in the library.

The room rose taller than any single candle had a right to illuminate. Shelves marched upward into shadow, heavy with bindings of bark and board, scroll-tubes, stitched quires, and thick volumes whose spines had been rubbed smooth by hands long turned to bone. Dust lay like gray velvet in places no palm reached. On the nearest table, a small icon lamp smoldered with a patient red eye.

Dmitri leaned close over a thick manuscript that seemed to drink the light. Its pages were yellowed, the edges softened with age. Across them, the script ran steady and severe—Tartarian history, copied and recopied, line after line, with marginal marks made by careful readers.

He read with his lips barely moving. Sometimes he paused as if listening for something in the silence, then returned to the words.

…of the great cities, ringed with walls and shining domes, where markets spoke a hundred tongues and yet all coins bore the same sign. Of the Great Khan, beloved, whose banners gathered the peoples like rivers joining a sea. Of the wars that ended not in ruin but in union, so that tribes once bent on vengeance found themselves seated at one table, eating the same bread beneath one law…

Dmitri's fingers—stained faintly with ink even after washing—rested at the margin to keep his place. He had read this passage before. He had read it a dozen times. And yet it did not dull. Each time, something in his chest tightened, as if the words carried not only meaning but weight.

Beside the manuscript lay his own copy book: clean sheets bound between boards, the first pages already filled in his careful hand. A feather quill lay across the inkpot. When Dmitri looked up, the candle flame threw a small trembling halo on the ceiling.

He dipped the quill, shook off the excess, and began again.

Scratch, scratch—soft as a mouse in straw. The only sound in the tall room besides the slow breathing of the building itself.

In the monastery, copying was not a hobby. It was obedience.

The abbot had said it plainly on the first winter Dmitri arrived: *"Words rot faster than stone, and men faster than words. If we do not copy, the world forgets. If the world forgets, then someone else writes in its place."*

Dmitri wrote each line as if it were a prayer.

When the candle sank low, he trimmed the wick, added a pinch of wax, and continued until the letters began to dance at the edges of his sight. His back ached. His fingertips tingled. He flexed his hand, glanced at the last page, and counted.

Two pages. Perhaps three, if he wrote with generous spacing.

“A couple more,” he murmured to himself.

The library answered with silence.

At last, when the monastery’s bell had long ceased its final night note and even the mice had gone still, Dmitri blotted the page, sanded it lightly, and closed the copy book with both hands as if sealing something alive inside.

He rose carefully, careful not to knock the table. The candle guttered as he moved; shadows swayed across the shelves, making the spines seem to lean in and listen.

Before leaving, he did what the Keepers always did: he returned the original manuscript to its place.

Not just “a shelf,” but a particular shelf, in a particular bay, behind a curtain of linen kept there for that purpose. He slid the heavy volume back until the wood lip caught it and it could not slip forward on its own. He drew the linen again and fastened the tie.

Then he carried his own copy book against his chest and made his way through the corridor.

The monastery at night had a smell like cold ash. His sandals whispered on the worn planks. Icons watched from alcoves, faces darkened by smoke and age. Somewhere, deep in the walls, water sighed through old pipes like distant breath.

In his cell, Dmitri set the copy book on a small shelf above his bedding. He washed his hands quickly in a basin, the water biting cold. He did not light another candle. He lay down fully clothed, as monks often did, and let the fatigue take him like a tide.

The last thing he thought, dim and drifting, was Magog.

The city of Magog. The local Khan. The road that would carry his work away from Novgorod’s walls.

He slept.

Morning came with a thin gray light at the window slit and the sounds of the monastery waking: a cough in a neighboring cell, a bucket scraping stone, the distant mutter of prayer.

A knock—soft, controlled—tapped at his door.

“Brother Dmitri,” came a voice. “Wake. The bell has already spoken.”

Dmitri pushed himself up. His joints complained. He blinked the sleep away and drew the bolt.

Brother Kirill stood in the doorway.

Kirill was older by some years, his tonsure neatly shorn, his beard trimmed close. His eyes were pale and watchful, and there was something in the way he held his hands—fingers folded, thumbs touching—that always made Dmitri feel as if he were being measured without being spoken to.

Kirill’s gaze slid, as if by accident, past Dmitri’s shoulder—straight to the shelf.

“To prayers,” Kirill said, but his voice carried no warmth.

Dmitri stepped aside to let him pass, but Kirill did not enter. He stayed in the doorway and nodded toward the copy book.

“Oh,” Kirill said. “I see.”

Dmitri’s throat tightened in a way that annoyed him. He reminded himself: *Nothing forbidden. Only duty.*

“I see you are copying the ancient history of Tartaria,” Kirill continued. His tone was mild, almost conversational. “Do you know how many copies have been made?”

Dmitri hesitated only a moment. “In this monastery? I do not count all hands. I know what I have done.”

“And what have you done, Brother Keeper?”

“Two full copies,” Dmitri said, keeping his voice even. “This one makes the third—nearly finished.” He nodded to the shelf. “Some of the brothers have made copies as well. Those have traveled. To Rostov. To Suzdal. One was sent with merchants downriver last year. I heard it went beyond the western forts.”

Kirill watched him as if watching a candle to see whether it would smoke.

“And where will this one go?” Kirill asked.

Dmitri felt the question hook him. He gave the answer as it had been given to him.

“To Magog,” he said. “To the local Khan. He asked for a clean copy. The abbot agreed.”

Kirill’s mouth twitched—not a smile, not quite. “Noted.”

He said the word like a scribe pressing a seal.

Then he stepped back, making room for Dmitri to leave, and turned away down the corridor without another word.

Dmitri stood a heartbeat longer, watching the back of Kirill’s robe disappear around the corner. He did not like that look—like a man who had counted coins and found the weight wanting.

He pulled his belt tight, tucked his hands into his sleeves against the chill, and went toward the chapel.

Prayers, then work.

The dining hall was already full when Dmitri arrived. Long benches, long tables, bowls of porridge steaming faintly, rye bread cut into thick pieces. The monks ate in near silence, as rules demanded, while one brother stood at a lectern and read from a book—some lives of saints, some admonitions, some histories turned into lessons.

The reader that morning was Brother Vasily, whose voice always sounded as if it were coming through wool.

“…and so the faithful man kept his word even when it cost him his comfort…”

A line of hungry novices shifted. A spoon clinked too loudly. Someone coughed and tried to make it small.

Dmitri sat between Brother Pavel and Brother Mikhail. Pavel gave him a brief glance and a subtle nod—friendly, in the monastery’s restrained way.

“You look like you slept in your boots,” Pavel murmured, barely moving his lips.

“I did,” Dmitri whispered back. “The manuscript does not copy itself.”

Mikhail snorted quietly. “If it did, Kirill would accuse it of heresy.”

Pavel’s mouth twitched. Dmitri hid his own almost-smile by lifting bread to his mouth.

They ate porridge with a little honey—rare and precious—and drank weak beer cut with water. Dmitri kept his eyes mostly down, listening to the reader and the scrape of spoons, letting the ordinary rhythm settle him.

When the reading ended and the hall began to empty, Pavel leaned closer.

“Is it true you’re going to Magog?” he asked.

Dmitri nodded. “Soon. Two pages left.”

Mikhail’s brows lifted. “Magog is not ‘soon.’ Magog is mud, wind, and men who look at your teeth when you speak.”

“It is also the Khan’s seat,” Pavel said. “And the Khan’s men pay for parchment.”

Dmitri tore off a piece of bread, chewed, and swallowed. “The abbot says the Khan wants the cleanest copy. No errors. No smudges.”

Mikhail lowered his voice another fraction. “And Kirill wants to know how many copies exist.”

Pavel shot Mikhail a warning look. “Watch your tongue.”

“I watch my tongue,” Mikhail said. “It is my eyes that I do not trust.”

Dmitri felt a chill that had nothing to do with the hall’s stone walls. He pushed it down.

“We do what we are told,” he said, and tried to make it sound like peace instead of fear.

After breakfast came the cleaning.

Dmitri’s duties as Keeper were not only ink and glory. They were also candles and dust and aching knees.

He fetched a bundle of beeswax tapers from the storeroom—careful, because wax was accounted for like grain. He carried them in both hands along the corridor, the smell of honey and smoke following him into the library.

Inside, the room was brighter in daylight, though still dim. He opened the shutters a thumb’s width, enough to let a pale bar of light cut across the floorboards. Dust swam in it, slow as falling snow.

He trimmed last night’s candle, replaced it with a fresh one, and lit it from the old flame before snuffing the stub. He set the new candle in its holder, checked that no wax dripped onto the table, then began the day’s chores.

He dusted the lower shelves with a cloth dampened in vinegar water—enough to catch grime, not enough to soak bindings. He straightened stacks that had slumped. He checked for mouse droppings and set a bit of bitter herb where mice disliked to go.

A novice—young, broad-shouldered, cheeks still too full for monastic life—appeared at the door.

“Brother Dmitri?” the novice asked.

“Yes, Fyodor?”

Fyodor stepped in, holding a bucket. “Brother Timofey says you need clean water for the inks.”

“I do,” Dmitri said. “Leave it there, by the table. And take these stubs to the tallow box.”

Fyodor did, glancing upward at the towering shelves as if he expected the books to fall and crush him.

“Is it true,” Fyodor blurted, then flushed, “that some books are older than the city?”

Dmitri paused. He could have snapped at the novice for idle curiosity. Instead, he softened his voice.

“Older than Novgorod,” he said. “Older than the walls. Maybe older than the names we use.”

Fyodor swallowed. “Do they… do they tell the truth?”

Dmitri looked at the manuscript’s shelf, hidden behind its linen curtain.

“Some do,” he said. “Some tell what men wished was true. Some lie on purpose. Your task is not to be afraid of them. Your task is to handle them carefully.”

Fyodor nodded as if those words were heavier than the bucket he carried.

When the novice left, Dmitri washed his hands—again—and returned to the table.

He opened his copy book.

The ink had dried well. No smearing. No blotches. He lined the pages with his ruler, checked the margins, and placed the original manuscript beside it.

Then he began the day’s copying.

Scratch, scratch.

Outside, the monastery yard filled with the sounds of labor. Inside, history moved one line at a time from one book to another.

He wrote of the Great Khan’s justice—how disputes between tribes were settled with the same measure, how roads were kept safe for traders and pilgrims alike. He wrote of cities whose towers carried bells that could be heard a day’s ride away. He wrote names of places he would never see, and yet felt, in the act of writing them, that he was stitching the empire together with thread.

At midday, he paused to eat a crust of bread and drink water. In the afternoon he returned to dusting, to checking bindings, to repairing a cracked board with glue warmed near the hearth.

By evening, the copy book lay open to the second-to-last page.

Two pages. Then one.

Then the road.

Dmitri closed the book gently and looked at the candle flame.

“Magog,” he said to the empty room, as if speaking the name aloud would make it less like a cliff edge and more like a path.

The library gave no answer—only the soft settling of old wood and the patient silence of shelves that had seen many men come and go.

And somewhere in the monastery, behind walls and habits and polite words, Brother Kirill had said, *Noted.*

By the third night after Kirill’s narrow-eyed visit, the last line was finally set.

Dmitri sprinkled fine sand over the fresh ink, waited, then tipped the page and let the grains slide into a shallow tray. He checked the letters one last time—no smear, no skipped word, no careless curl of the hand. He closed the copy book and pressed his palm upon the cover as if sealing an oath.

“It is done,” he whispered.

He wrapped the finished History in oiled cloth first, then in a second layer of plain linen. The bundle became a solid, quiet weight in his hands—too important to be merely paper.

Back in his cell, he moved with a practiced economy, the way a man does when he knows the road will punish forgetting.

He spread a square of cloth on the floor and began laying out food: dried fish, black bread hard as board, a small pouch of salt, a lump of smoked fat, a coil of dried berries, a paper twist of crushed herbs for fever. He added a small skin of water and another for weak beer, then tied the cloth into a traveling knot, leaving enough slack to open and close without untying the whole thing every time.

From the wooden chest at the foot of his bed he drew out what a monk was not supposed to need—yet what the road always demanded.

First, a short sword, its edge kept honest with a whetstone. He held it for a moment, remembering the old rule: *a blade is not for pride; it is for wolves, thieves, and war.* He slid it into its scabbard and buckled it to his belt.

Then a small book—worn, thick for its size, clasped with a simple hook: the Tartarian Christian Bible in a traveling format, pages thin as onion-skin, margins filled with tiny notes in older hands. He slipped it into the inner fold of his robe, close to his chest.

He pulled out a heavy helmet next, its surface marked by old dents and polished bright where it had been handled. Travel boots followed—stiff leather, good soles, iron nails set deep. He sat and laced them tight, tugging until the knots bit.

Chain mail gauntlets—short, practical, reinforced with leather at the knuckles—went into his pack for now; on the road he would wear them when the woods grew thick or the steppe too empty. Over his monk's robe he buckled a simple leather cuirass, dyed dark and worn soft with use, the straps creaking as he tightened them. It looked wrong on a monk. It looked right on a traveler.

From a small cup at the back of the chest he took a coin bag—imperial coins stamped clean, the double-headed eagle faintly raised under his thumb. He tied it to his belt where he could feel its weight and know if it went missing.

A blanket, folded tight. Flint and steel. A silver dagger, narrow and keen, more tool than ornament. A tin cup, a small pot, a wooden spoon. A hook and line for fishing, wrapped carefully so the barb would not snag his cloth. He added a length of cord. He added a candle stub.

When he was done, his cell looked stripped—like a place ready for another man.

Dmitri lifted the food bag onto one shoulder, took the wrapped History in both hands, and left without lingering.

The stables smelled of hay and horse sweat and old leather. A stable boy bowed quickly, eyes flicking to the sword, then to the monk's face, as if deciding which was more dangerous.

"A rested horse," Dmitri said. "Not a proud one."

The boy nodded and led out a sturdy bay with a calm eye and a thick neck, the kind of animal that did not waste strength on fear. Dmitri checked the girth strap, ran a hand down the horse's leg to feel for heat or swelling, then swung into the saddle with a grunt.

As he rode out, the monastery's walls slipped behind him like a closing book.

Novgorod opened ahead—wide, loud, and magnificent.

Even in morning haze, the city seemed carved from wealth and will. The main roads were laid in heavy stone, broad enough for two wagons to pass without shouting, and the iron shoes of horses clopped sharply against them in a steady, ringing rhythm. Timber houses stood shoulder-to-shoulder with taller stone halls; painted shutters and carved eaves made even common buildings proud. In the richer quarters, facades wore bright frescoes—saints, khans, victories—colors surviving the northern weather by some craft known to the imperial painters.

People flooded the streets like river water.

Nobles in fur-trimmed coats moved beside peasants in patched wool without the usual fear you'd see in lesser lands. A carriage rolled by, its wheels bound in iron, its driver snapping the reins once for show rather than need. Traders in felt hats argued good-naturedly with craftsmen. Soldiers in fitted plate—real plate, shining and riveted—stood at corners with relaxed discipline, spear butts planted on stone, watching the crowd as men watch weather.

The empire's banner was everywhere: the double-headed eagle on poles, on shields, stitched into cloth that fluttered like a living thing in the wind.

Above it all rose the city's towers.

One bell tower in particular dominated the square, tall as a cliff face, its stonework worked with intricate bands and patterns. Dmitri had always loved the mechanism housed within it: visible gears of bronze and iron, turning slowly behind a lattice—an open, proud demonstration of craft. The tower's great clock face did not merely tell time; it measured the city's order.

And above the churches, on the proud onion domes and spires, metal poles reached upward—dark rods against the pale sky—meant to drink the air's charge. Wires ran down from them in careful lines to the churches and nearby buildings, disappearing into walls. On damp days, when clouds hung low, Dmitri had seen blue sparks dance faintly at the tips, like tiny spirits afraid to land.

One church held the city's most famous weight: a bell so enormous it seemed impossible, the iron mouth of it like a cave. They said it weighed ten tons. They said its voice carried not only across fields, but into men's bones. When it rang for feast days, even the river seemed to hesitate.

In the central square stood another monument of power—a Khan cannon, so massive it looked less like a weapon and more like a proclamation hammered into metal. Thirty tons, they said. The barrel's mouth yawned toward the sky, silent and dignified, decorated with raised lines and symbols that spoke of victories and dominion. Children ran circles around its base as if it were a plaything and not the memory of fire.

Near the market stalls, the empire's everyday wonder continued.

Merchants displayed intricate machines on cloth-covered tables—small hand-cranks that could lift surprising weight, little gear-boxes sealed in wood, polished metal spheres that chimed when turned, tools whose purposes were not obvious until a seller demonstrated with quick fingers and a grin. A man held up a palm-sized device and spun it; it hummed like a bee. A woman beside him offered brass needles and coils of wire, speaking rapid prices in the empire's shared tongue—Russian braided with Turkic cadence, harsh consonants softened by flowing endings.

And the people—so many kinds, so many faces.

Tall steppe men with braided hair and narrow eyes, shorter forest folk with broad cheekbones, traders with darker skin from southern roads, pale northerners with red beards—tribes and races mingled with the ease of long habit. Most wore crosses. Some wore caps and belts marked with Judaist signs. A few carried prayer beads and spoke in low Arabic-toned words. They traded, they laughed, they argued, they moved as one city.

Dmitri rode in silence through it all, keeping to the right side of the main road, his wrapped History held tight in front of him like a child.

At one corner, a nun stood under the eave of a small chapel, singing a prayer a cappella. Her voice rose clean and unaccompanied above the clatter of hooves and wheels, threading through the crowd as if the air itself made room for it. Dmitri's horse slowed instinctively, ears twitching.

Dmitri lowered his eyes in respect as he passed.

The city was great. The city was beautiful. The city was alive.

And, as he rode, Dmitri felt the thin edge of unease from Brother Kirill's "Noted" return like a small stone in his boot.

The gates loomed ahead—massive timbers banded in iron, set into a wall three meters thick. Watchtowers rose on either side, their tops crowned with wooden roofs and narrow slits for archers. Guards stood at attention in full plate armor, faces stern behind raised visors. One held the imperial banner high; the eagle's two heads looked east and west at once, unblinking.

A clerk sat at a small table inside the gatehouse, inkpot ready, ledger open.

Dmitri reined in.

"Name and destination," the clerk said without looking up, already wetting his pen.

"Monk Dmitri," Dmitri replied, voice clear. He held up the wrapped bundle slightly, not offering it, just letting it be seen. "Heading to Magog to deliver Empire History book to Azim Khan."

The clerk's pen paused. That name—Khan—always slowed a man's hand.

He wrote,"The year"

"Year of our Lord Iesus," he said, using the formal phrasing, "three hundred and fifty."

The clerk licked his thumb, turned a page, and wrote again. "Day"

"Thursday, Thirteenth. Month of March."

The clerk repeated it under his breath as he wrote, then finally looked up at Dmitri—only briefly, only enough to make sure the face matched the title.

"Go," he said.

A guard pulled the gate lever. Wood groaned. Iron clanked. The gate opened like a mouth.

Dmitri rode through.

For a moment, the city's noise fell behind him as if a door had closed. The road beyond the wall bent crookedly, following the river's curve. The air smelled cleaner here—cold water, wet earth, the first hint of thaw.

He guided the horse down the slope and kept close to the riverbank where the ground was firm. The river ran dark and quick, carrying broken ice like shattered glass.

He rode on.

A bridge appeared—stone-backed, sturdy, built to last longer than men. As he crossed, he saw the first spring flowers pushing their small heads from the ground near the bridge stones—brave specks of color against the brown earth. Birds sang in the brush, testing their voices as if unsure winter had truly surrendered.

Dmitri did not speak. He did not sing. He only listened.

Behind him, Novgorod's towers faded into the morning mist.

Ahead, the road stretched thin and uncertain, carrying him toward Magog—toward Azim Khan—and toward whatever waited for a monk who carried a book too heavy to be merely paper.

Dmitri rode for an hour with the river still somewhere to his left, the road narrowing as the city's stone certainty gave way to earth and root.

The morning air tasted of thaw—wet bark, cold water, and the faint sweetness of something green daring to begin. His horse kept a steady walking pace, head bobbing gently, breath puffing in small ghosts. The wrapped History sat secured against his chest beneath the outer strap, as if it were part of him now. Every so often he touched it without thinking, a quick check like a man touching his purse in a crowd.

A lone traveler came toward him—an old man with a gray beard like uncombed flax. Over his shoulder was a stick, and from the stick hung a small cloth bag tied at the end, swinging with each careful step. The old man's boots were mismatched. His eyes were clear.

They approached, and as custom demanded, they acknowledged each other without warmth and without hostility—two souls on a road that belonged to no one.

"God save you," the old man said.

"And you," Dmitri replied.

The old man's gaze flicked to Dmitri's belt where the short sword rode, then to the monk's hood and the leather armor beneath the robe. A nod—understanding, perhaps. Roads did not ask whether you wore a cross; roads only asked whether you lived.

"Where do you come from?" the old man asked, voice roughened by wind.

"Novgorod," Dmitri said.

The old man spat to the side, not in contempt—more like habit. "Big stones, big bells. Big men."

"And where do you go?"

The old man lifted his stick a fraction. "Wherever the next crust is waiting." He gave a toothless grin. "If the Lord built roads, He meant someone to walk them."

Dmitri inclined his head. "Then walk in peace."

The old man shuffled past. The cloth bag at the end of his stick bobbed like a pendulum, marking time.

Dmitri watched him go for a moment, then faced forward again.

The Lord built roads… he thought. *And men built gates.*

Not long after, thunder came—not from the sky, but from hooves.

Four horsemen tore past him toward Novgorod, fast and urgent. Their armor flashed in broken pieces between their cloaks—full harness, well-fitted, the sort paid for by a treasury rather than a farmer's luck. Dust burst behind them in a pale fan, hanging in the air a moment like smoke.

They rode like men carrying a message that would not survive delay.

Cossaks, Dmitri thought. Or something close—steppe men in imperial service, born in the saddle and tempered by border wars. One turned his head as they passed, eyes narrow behind his visor slit, measuring Dmitri in the span of a heartbeat.

No salute. No insult. Just speed.

The wind from their passing rattled Dmitri's hood and made his horse toss its head. Dmitri murmured a calming word, stroked the animal's neck once, and let the road settle back into quiet.

Soon a family wagon creaked by, moving the other direction—toward Novgorod. The wagon was old, its wooden ribs worn smooth by years, its wheels patched with uneven iron. A man walked beside it with a hand on the rim as if guiding the wagon by touch. A woman sat up front wrapped in a shawl, a child tucked against her side. Skins were piled high in the back, along with a low table and what looked like half a chest—furniture meant for selling or trading.

The man glanced at Dmitri and nodded, not stopping.

"Market?" Dmitri asked.

The man's mouth turned up. "If God grants it."

"May He grant it," Dmitri said.

The wagon rolled on. The child stared at Dmitri's helmet strapped behind the saddle, wide-eyed, as if monks were not supposed to look like men who expected knives.

Dmitri let them go, the creak of the wagon fading behind him.

He rode in peace for a while. That was when his mind began doing what it always did when the body found rhythm: it wandered into books.

Great cities… Great Khan… united peoples… The words he had copied for weeks floated behind his eyes. It was one thing to write about unity in candlelight; it was another to ride through its living proof—old men with sticks, armored riders, market families, all on the same road under the same banner.

And yet—

Kirill's voice returned in his memory like a cold fingertip on the spine: *Do you know how many copies have been made?*

Dmitri tightened his grip on the reins.

"Stop," he told himself softly. "You are not a frightened novice."

But he could not stop thinking. A Keeper did not merely copy words; he carried their consequences.

Before midday he reached a small spring spilling out from between stones. The water ran clear and quick, making a bright ribbon over dark earth. Dmitri dismounted, loosened the horse's girth a fraction, and let it drink first—always the animal first. Then he cupped his hands and drank himself, cold water biting his lips, waking him more sharply than any bell.

He rinsed his face, wiped his hands on his robe, and stood a moment listening.

The land was not silent. It was simply honest. Water, wind, birds.

He mounted again.

As the sun climbed higher, his thoughts shifted from contemplation to calculation.

March ends soon. The letter came half a year ago. “By the end of March.” Not “when you can.” Not “when the road allows.” By the end.

Dmitri clicked his tongue, urged the horse into a faster pace. The walk became a brisk trot. The trot became a canter.

He did not like to gallop for long—he was not a courier and this was not a fresh horse meant to burn itself out—but he could not afford to be slow. The Khan was not a patient man, and the Khan’s disappointment had teeth.

Orders are orders, he told himself. *And obedience is a prayer made with the body.*

He rode for hours, the road unwinding through sparse woodland and open stretches where last year’s grass lay flattened and gray. He kept watch for bandits the way all travelers did—watching tree lines, watching hills, watching for unnatural stillness.

Late in the day, the road brought him through a small village.

The houses were low and mean, with roofs patched in straw and boards. Smoke did not rise from many chimneys. The place felt abandoned—except it was not.

People lay on the ground.

Not sleeping. Not resting.

Bodies.

Some sprawled half on the road, some near fence posts, some in doorways as if they had fallen and been left where they fell. A few figures still moved—slow, bent shapes that kept distance from the fallen, wrapping cloth over their mouths, eyes hollow and wary.

Dmitri’s stomach tightened.

Plague, he thought immediately. Then, because he had read monastery accounts and heard travelers talk: *Or cholera. Or some river sickness. Or God’s punishment, if you ask the wrong kind of man.*

He breathed shallowly through his sleeve and kept his horse to the far edge of the road. He did not look too long at any one face. Looking made you human. Being human made you stop. Stopping made you die.

Bad air carries it, he reminded himself, and though he was not sure whether that was fully true, he had no better rule to cling to.

A thin woman stood beside a well, head wrapped in cloth. She watched him pass with the dull intensity of someone too tired to beg. Dmitri wanted to throw her bread. He wanted to do something that would make him less like a man riding through misery as if it were a puddle.

But he saw how the others avoided the bodies. He saw how even compassion stepped carefully in a place like that.

He murmured a prayer under his breath—quick, almost angry.

“Lord have mercy,” he said, and meant it.

Then he pushed the horse onward until the village was behind him and the air felt clean again.

He did not slow until his muscles began to shake from the saddle's constant motion.

When the sun began to sink, he finally let the horse drop back to a walk, the animal's sides heaving gently. He spoke to it softly, praised it, and promised it rest without knowing if promises mattered to beasts.

Night came quickly, as it did in the north.

He found a sheltered spot off the road where pine trees thickened and the ground rose slightly—high enough to avoid water pooling. Beneath the trees, the moss was soft and springy, a green bed that held warmth better than bare earth.

He dismounted, led the horse to a sturdy tree, and tied the reins with a knot he could undo quickly if trouble came. He checked the animal's legs again, ran a hand along its neck, then set about camp.

Flint and steel sparked. Dry needles caught, then thicker twigs. Soon a small fire took, snapping and whispering. The light pushed the darkness back only a few paces, but it was enough. Fire changed the world. In the dark, everything could be a wolf. In firelight, at least some things became merely shadows.

Dmitri ate dried fish and black bread, chewing slowly, feeling the salt pull thirst from his mouth. He took a small sip of ale—just enough to warm his throat, not enough to dull his senses. He kept the sword within arm's reach. The wrapped History stayed near his chest even when he lay down, tucked under the blanket like a child he refused to leave behind.

For a while he stared at the flames and let his thoughts drift.

I copy the Great Khan's victories, he thought. *I copy the unity of peoples and cities. And still I ride past bodies in the road as if history does not include them.*

He did not like that thought. It felt like a crack in a well-made wall.

But fatigue came like a hand closing around his skull. The fire's warmth seeped into his bones. The horse shifted and sighed, hooves scraping softly in the dirt.

Dmitri pulled the blanket tight, curled on the moss, and let sleep take him.

The night remained cold, but the fire held.

Morning arrived with dampness.

The fire had collapsed into a bed of coals. Dmitri woke stiff, breath visible in the air. His first action was the same as every traveler's: he checked that everything was still there. Sword. Coin bag. Bundle. Horse.

All present.

He exhaled slowly, then rose and went to wash. Nearby was a small pond—more a broad puddle caught in a shallow dip, fed by seepage and last snowmelt. The water was clear enough. He knelt, splashed his face, rubbed his hands, and rinsed his mouth. The cold bit hard, but it drove the last fog of sleep out of him.

He ate a small crust, packed quickly, and stamped out the remaining coals with care. A monk did not leave fire to wander.

Then he mounted and turned his face to the road.

Today he would make distance.

He urged the horse into a steady canter, then faster, letting the animal stretch out. The world blurred into rhythm—hoofbeats, wind, the creak of leather, the steady pull of the road.

Hours passed. The sun rose higher. The land shifted subtly, as if the earth itself were changing its language beneath him.

Soon Susdalia, he thought. *Then the Cazan Forests.*

He had heard of those woods from other travelers: thick stands of dark trees, a road that threaded through like a seam, places where sound died and even birds went quiet. Places where men disappeared and were later found stripped to bone—or never found at all.

He tightened his cloak, not from cold, but from the feeling of approaching something that could not be reasoned with.

“If I arrive late,” he told himself, voice low, “it will not be my comfort they take. It will be the monastery’s peace.”

He pictured Novgorod’s towers, the library’s tall shelves, the manuscript hidden behind linen. He pictured Kirill’s pale eyes and the way he said *Noted.*

Dmitri urged the horse onward.

The road ahead narrowed, and the first thicker line of trees appeared in the distance—dark, dense, waiting like a closed door.

Dmitri rode the whole day with only short pauses to water the horse and swallow bread. The land gradually changed its face: fewer open stretches, more clustered trees, the road narrowing as if it were being swallowed.

By late afternoon the Cazan Forest rose ahead—an old wall of pines and dark fir, trunks packed close like spears planted in the earth. Even the light seemed to hesitate at its edge.

He crossed the threshold and the world changed at once.

The air cooled. The smell of resin and damp bark replaced the wet-spring sweetness of the open road. His horse, after so many hours of gallop and hard pace, was allowed to walk. Dmitri loosened the reins and let the animal pick its steps, hooves landing softer on the forest’s packed soil.

At first there were sounds: a distant hoot, something small scurrying through underbrush, the occasional snap of a twig. Then, deeper in, even those thinned out.

Soon the forest was quiet in a way that felt deliberate.

No birdsong. No chatter of hidden life. Only the steady, patient clop of hooves and the faint creak of leather as Dmitri shifted in the saddle. The trees stood too straight. The shadows between them looked thick enough to hold secrets.

Keep your eyes moving, he told himself. *And don’t let your mind wander into books.*

But the mind wandered anyway, because fear invites memory.

He thought of Novgorod’s stone streets and towers. He thought of the library’s tall shelves and the candle’s soft pool of light. He thought of Kirill’s pale eyes.

Noted.

Dmitri swallowed and forced his attention outward again.

That was when the smell reached him.

Smoke.

Not the clean, far-off smoke of a village chimney, but the close, oily smell of a small fire fed on whatever was at hand. It drifted between trunks, thin as thread, and caught in his nostrils.

He slowed the horse.

Ahead, through the trees, he saw a glow—low, orange, flickering. And near the road, just off to the side where the forest opened slightly, four figures sat around a fire.

For a heartbeat, Dmitri felt relief.

Travelers, he thought. *Resting, like I did. Warmth and company.*

He kept his hands visible and guided the horse forward at a calm walk.

As he approached, the figures shifted. One rose. Then another. Then the third, and the fourth. They didn’t wave. They didn’t call out greeting. They moved with the slow certainty of men who had already decided what the next moment would be.

Dmitri saw dirty faces smeared with soot and old sweat. Leather armor patched with string. One man’s sword was rusty along the edge. Another twirled a dagger as if it were a habit. A third leaned on a spear like a walking stick. The fourth hefted a club studded with crude spikes, its head blackened from use.

They spread slightly, not quite blocking the road but making the space feel suddenly narrow.

Dmitri raised his voice, keeping it level.

“Greetings, travelers,” he said. “Going to Novgorod?”

No answer.

Only the crackle of the fire and the soft shuffle of boots on needle-strewn earth.

The man in front—broad-shouldered, hair tied back with a strip of cloth—stepped closer. His eyes were bright in a way Dmitri didn’t like. Not drunken. Not mad. Hungry.

He barked, “Come off the horse.”

Dmitri’s fingers tightened on the reins. “Brother,” he began, choosing the word on purpose, hoping to remind them of God and law and banners—

The man cut him off with a spit of laughter.

“No Novgorod monk trespasses our land without paying tribute to the Novaski clan,” he said, voice rising as if he were reciting a rule older than scripture. “We have roamed these woods since the first forefathers and will continue to do so. Everyone pays if they want to live. You will too—”

He leaned in, and Dmitri smelled sour breath and smoke.

“—or your prayers are finished.”

Dmitri’s mind snapped into cold clarity.

This was not a misunderstanding. This was not a tax station. This was not hungry men asking alms.

This was a knife to the throat of the road.

“I have no time,” Dmitri said, forcing steadiness into his voice. “I travel on duty. I carry something that must reach Magog by the end of March. I won’t be delayed.”

The man’s lips peeled back. “Duty?” he mocked. “Your duty is to die quietly if you’re too proud to pay.”

Dmitri shifted slightly in the saddle, angling his body so the wrapped History remained pressed under the strap, protected by his forearm.

One of the bandits—thin, quick—moved around the horse’s flank, eyes flicking to Dmitri’s belt where the coin bag hung.

“You’ll give us coin,” the thin one said, finally speaking, “or you’ll give us that pretty sword.”

Dmitri’s jaw tightened. “Step back.”

The thin man didn’t.

He lunged in, grabbed Dmitri’s boot, and yanked hard.

The world tilted.

Dmitri lost balance, the saddle slipping away from under him. He hit the ground shoulder-first, breath blasting out of him as cold dirt and needles bit through his robe and armor. For a second, all he saw were tree trunks and the pale strip of road above him.

He rolled instinctively, scrabbling for space, hearing laughter and feet and the horse snorting in alarm.

Now he knew, fully, what was happening.

“Coin!” someone shouted.

“Kill him if he bites!”

“Take the book too—look how he holds it!”

Dmitri’s hand found his sword hilt. Metal rasped as he dragged it free. Pain sparked in his shoulder, but it was distant—irrelevant compared to the weight under his strap.

Timeline, he thought wildly. *The book. The Khan. The monastery’s peace.*

He got to one knee, blade up, and his voice came out hard, not like a monk at all.

“Back.”

They didn’t.

They surged.

Dmitri’s blade met the rusty sword with a screech of metal. The first bandit, face smeared with dirt and sweat, snarled a curse as sparks flew. Dmitri twisted, drove his sword through the man’s leather cuirass, and ripped upward. Intestines spilled in a hot rush, steaming in the cool forest air. The bandit screamed, clutching his guts as they uncoiled between his fingers, and collapsed.

The second lunged with a dagger, stabbing low. Dmitri sidestepped and brought his sword down in a savage arc. The blade sheared through the man’s wrist. The hand flew away still gripping the dagger, blood spraying in a wide arc. The bandit howled, staring at the stump, until Dmitri’s return swing took his head clean off. It bounced once on the dirt road and rolled into the underbrush.

The third charged with a spear, thrusting wildly. Dmitri grabbed the shaft mid-stab, yanked the man forward, and rammed his sword through the bandit’s open mouth. The tip burst out the back of his neck. Blood bubbled from the wound as the spearman gurgled and thrashed. Dmitri twisted the blade and tore it free. The body dropped, twitching.

The last bandit swung his spiked wooden club in a desperate overhead blow. Dmitri ducked under it, rose inside the man’s guard, and hacked sideways across his belly. Leather split. Guts poured out in thick ropes, slapping wetly onto the ground. The bandit staggered, eyes wide, screaming every filthy oath he knew. Dmitri reversed his grip and drove the sword up under the chin. The scream cut off in a wet gurgle. The head lolled back, nearly severed, as the body crumpled.

When it was over, the forest returned to its terrible quiet.

Dmitri stood shaking, sword low, breath tearing in and out of him. His robe was smeared with mud and dark stains. His shoulder burned. One knuckle throbbed where a blade had kissed it through the glove.

The four men lay sprawled in the needles and dirt, shapes that had been threats moments ago and were now only flesh cooling into earth.

For a long moment Dmitri simply stared, as if waiting for God to tell him whether he had done right.

Nothing spoke.

Only a faint wind through branches, and somewhere far off a single bird finally dared a cautious call.

Dmitri forced himself to move. He checked the strap across his chest first—hands quick, almost frantic.

The wrapped History was still there.

He swallowed, a rough sound.

“Forgive me,” he murmured—not sure whether he meant the dead men, or himself, or the road that had made him this way.

He searched them quickly, as travelers did, because travelers learned that mercy did not mean stupidity. He found a few imperial coins—dull, worn, but spendable—and a small pouch of dried meat that smelled sour. He took the coins and left the rest. He did not linger to examine faces.

He retrieved his horse, which had backed a few steps but hadn't bolted. The animal's eyes were wide; it danced once, then stilled when Dmitri laid a hand on its neck and spoke low words into its ear.

"It's done," Dmitri whispered. "It's done. Easy."

He mounted with effort, wincing as his shoulder protested. He kept the sword out for a few heartbeats longer, scanning the trees for more movement—more eyes—more hungry men.

Nothing.

The Cazan Forest did not promise safety. It merely offered no immediate answer.

Dmitri sheathed his sword, tightened the strap on the History bundle, and urged the horse forward.

At first the animal walked, tense and quick-stepping. Then Dmitri clicked his tongue and pushed it into a trot.

Then into a canter.

Then into a gallop.

The road unfurled under them, dark and narrow, and the trees whipped past like silent witnesses.

He could not afford delay. The letter had been clear. The Khan was not to be disappointed.

Dmitri leaned low over the horse's neck and drove on through the deepening forest, chasing his schedule as if it were a lifeline—because now, he understood, it was.

On the Road

Dmitri did not slow until his lungs burned and his horse's breath came hard in the cold forest air.

He rode as if the trees behind him could reach out and claw his ankles. Every time the road bent, he half-expected another fire-glow between trunks, another set of hungry faces. But the Cazan Forest only watched him go—silent, dense, indifferent.

Hours and hours passed in a blur of trunks and shadow.

By the time dusk thickened into full night, he could feel the horse's fatigue in the shortening of its stride. Dmitri finally yielded. He found an old oak that rose from the forest floor like a pillar, its bark ridged and ancient, and led the horse off the road.

No fire tonight. Not in these woods. Not after what had happened.

He fed the horse a small portion from his bag and let it drink from a shallow seep where water collected between stones. He ate little himself—bread and a strip of fish, chewed without pleasure. His shoulder still ached; his knuckles throbbed. He checked the wrapped History twice, then a third time, as if his fingers did not trust his eyes.

Then he lay beneath the oak, pulled the blanket over his head, and slept in broken pieces—half awake at every crack, every wind-shift, every imagined step in the dark.

Morning came damp and gray.

He washed quickly with cold water, tightened straps, murmured a short prayer that sounded more like a soldier's habit than a monk's devotion, and rode on.

Another full day of travel.

By afternoon the forest began to thin. Light opened between trunks. Birds returned cautiously—first a single call, then another, and then the whole living chatter of the world resumed as if it had only been holding its breath.

When Dmitri finally crossed out of the tree line, he felt something in him unclench.

Open land spread ahead in rolling ridges. The road widened again. Wind touched his face without needing to squeeze through branches. He let the horse settle into a steady pace and, for the first time since the ambush, allowed himself to look up at the sky.

I am still on schedule, he thought, counting days in his head. *Barely. But still.*

He rode on through the next stretch as the land rose into stony hills. Time passed in the road's usual way—slow in the body, fast in memory. There were small hamlets, fenced fields, herds watched by boys with sticks. Once, he passed an imperial patrol at a distance and felt safer just seeing the glint of armor.

Then came mountains.

Not towering peaks, but stern backs of rock that squeezed the road into a narrow pass. The air turned sharper. The wind carried the scent of stone and cold water. Dmitri felt the horse's cautiousness here—the animal placing hooves carefully, ears twitching at echoes.

By evening he saw smoke ahead, proper smoke this time—rising from chimneys in a line.

Sagatin village.

It sat cradled in the pass like something sheltered by necessity: stout houses with thick roofs, stone foundations, and a wooden palisade that had been repaired many times. A creek cut through it, and bridges of timber crossed at two points. Travelers moved in and out—mules, carts, men with packs.

And, blessedly, there was a tavern.

A signboard hung above the door, painted with a black ram and a foam cup. Warm light spilled through the cracks. Dmitri dismounted, led the horse to the stable boy, paid a coin without argument, and stepped inside.

Heat hit him first—thick, smoky warmth. Then sound: voices, laughter, mugs thumping tables, a fiddle in the corner sawing out a tune that made even tired men tap their boots.

Dmitri's shoulders sagged.

He found a table near the wall where he could keep his back covered and still see the room. He sat, set his wrapped History under his cloak and against his side, and lifted a hand to the serving girl.

She approached with a practiced smile that measured coin and danger at a glance.

“Food,” Dmitri said. “And water.”

“Water?” she repeated, amused. “In Sagatin? Are you sick?”

“Not yet,” Dmitri answered.

She laughed once and nodded. “What kind of food?”

“Whatever is hot and honest.”

“Then lamb,” she decided, and disappeared.

When the meal came, Dmitri almost forgot his exhaustion.

A wooden platter held chunks of lamb roasted dark at the edges, the meat glossy with fat and herbs. Beside it were potatoes—cut and fried in a pan until their corners crisped, then tossed with onion and a pinch of salt. The smell alone made his mouth flood. A small bowl of sour cream sat at the side, and bread so fresh it still steamed when torn.

Cold water followed—clear, biting.

Dmitri ate slowly at first, then faster, hunger waking fully. The lamb was tender, the potatoes rich and smoky. For a moment he was only a man with a belly and tired hands, not a Keeper with deadlines and blood on his memory.

When he finished, the girl brought a sweet dessert: baked apples with honey and crushed nuts, their skins wrinkled and shining. Dmitri ate one and felt warmth spread through him like a blessing.

Then he allowed himself a stronger ale.

It came in a clay mug, darker than the monastery’s weak brew, with a bite that made his eyes water slightly. He took a careful swallow and felt his muscles loosen.

Afterward, he climbed to the room he’d paid for upstairs—small, clean enough, with a bed that looked like a miracle of softness compared to moss and dirt. He set the History bundle beside him, boots off, sword within reach, and fell onto the mattress.

Sleep took him in a single breath.

He woke some hours later—still tired, but no longer hollow. The tavern’s noise rose through the floorboards like a distant sea. Dmitri rolled his shoulder, winced, and decided he would rather be among people than alone with his thoughts.

He went back downstairs, found the same table, and took out his pipe. Tobacco was a small luxury, but the road allowed small comforts when it took so much else. He packed it, lit it from a candle, and drew smoke in slowly, letting it fill his mouth and chest.

He exhaled. The smoke curled upward and vanished into the tavern’s haze.

For a few quiet minutes, he watched the room: travelers bargaining, locals playing dice, a man singing poorly and being forgiven for it. A place like this held the empire together as surely as any fortress—mugs, jokes, trade, warmth.

Then someone walked up to his table.

A man and a woman—both road-dusty, both dressed better than peasants but not like nobles. The man had a broad smile and lively eyes, the kind that suggested he'd been punched in his life and learned to laugh about it. The woman wore a scarf around her hair and a knife at her belt, and her gaze took in Dmitri's sword and monk's robe in one glance.

Without asking, they sat.

Dmitri lifted an eyebrow but didn't protest. In taverns, tables belonged to whoever could keep them.

The man leaned back as if they were old friends. "Brother," he said cheerfully. "You look like you've argued with a forest and lost."

Dmitri let out a short breath that could have been a laugh. "The forest argued first."

"Aha! I told you," the man said, turning to the woman. "I told you forests have tongues."

"They have teeth too," the woman replied dryly.

The man waved for ale. "Two mugs," he called, then pointed at Dmitri with a grin. "And one for the holy traveler, if he's not too holy to drink."

"I'm holy enough to be thirsty," Dmitri said.

That earned him approval. The man clapped his hands once. "Good. Then we won't have to pretend."

The ale arrived. They drank. The man introduced himself with a flourish.

"Gavrila," he said. "And this is my wife—Anfisa. Don't let her quiet fool you. She can split a man's head like a melon."

Anfisa didn't smile, but her eyes warmed a fraction. "Only if he deserves it."

Dmitri nodded to them both. "Brother Dmitri."

"Brother Dmitri," Gavrila repeated as if tasting the name. "A Keeper, I'd wager. You have ink in your fingers even after washing."

Dmitri glanced at his hand, mildly surprised. "Do I?"

"Of course," Gavrila said. "Ink never truly leaves. It goes into the skin the way roads go into the feet."

Anfisa sipped her ale. "Where are you going?"

Dmitri considered lying out of habit—then decided it wasn't worth it here. "Magog."

Gavrila whistled softly. "Magog. That's not a stroll to a neighbor's fence."

"No," Dmitri agreed.

"Merchant business?" Gavrila asked.

"Monastery business."

That made Gavrila’s brows lift. He leaned forward, lowering his voice slightly—not with suspicion, but with curiosity. “You carry something important then.”

Dmitri blew a thin stream of pipe smoke. “Important enough.”

Gavrila accepted that boundary with the ease of a man who made his living respecting and ignoring boundaries as needed.

“Well,” he said, raising his mug, “to important enough. May it arrive before some fool tries to steal it.”

Dmitri clinked mugs with him. “Amen.”

They drank again, and the conversation loosened into the kind of friendly road talk that stitched strangers together for an hour.

Gavrila asked about Novgorod’s markets. Dmitri asked about the pass ahead. Anfisa complained about mule traders who cheated with rotten harness straps. Dmitri, unexpectedly, told them about the monastery’s endless candle accounting, and Gavrila laughed so hard he nearly choked.

“You monks,” Gavrila said, wiping his eyes. “You fear God, but it’s wax that truly rules you.”

“It’s ink,” Dmitri corrected. “Wax is merely its cousin.”

Another round appeared. Dmitri did not stop it.

Then Gavrila leaned back, voice bright with pride. “We come from Serpanow caravan in Lucomorye,” he announced, like a herald. “Ever heard of it?”

“I’ve heard the name,” Dmitri said. “A camp on the river roads.”

“A camp?” Gavrila scoffed, delighted. “Brother, it’s a moving city. Three thousand people when the season is full. Tents, wagons, cookfires, traders, hunters, smiths, singers—everything. You can buy a knife, a goat, a bride, and a prayer in the same morning.”

Anfisa snorted into her mug. “Not a bride.”

“Not a bride,” Gavrila corrected quickly, holding up his hands. “Only a joke. Don’t stab me.”

Dmitri found himself smiling properly now, the first real smile since the Cazan Forest.

“What do you sell?” he asked.

“Hunting season goods,” Gavrila said promptly. “Furs—proper furs, thick as winter dreams. River pearls—small, but clean. Fish by the barrel. Home-brewed ale that can knock the sin out of a priest. Bread so fresh you can smell it from the next wagon.”

Anfisa added, “Animals too. Hares, geese, a few horses. And tools. The smiths make good arrowheads.”

“And stories,” Gavrila said, tapping his temple. “We sell those for free if you drink enough.”

Dmitri exhaled smoke, amused. “Then you’re a dangerous merchant.”

“The most dangerous kind,” Gavrila agreed happily. “The kind who convinces you the world is still worth traveling through.”

Anfisa looked at Dmitri’s posture, at the way his hand sometimes drifted unconsciously toward whatever was under his cloak.

“You’ve had trouble on the road,” she said, not a question.

Dmitri paused.

Gavrila’s grin softened a little. “Forest trouble?”

Dmitri held their gaze for a moment, then gave a small nod. “Yes.”

Anfisa’s eyes narrowed, as if mentally marking a route. “Cazan?”

“Yes.”

Gavrila made a face. “Ah. The woods with hungry men. I hate that stretch. Always feels like the trees are counting your coins.”

Dmitri’s mouth tightened. “They tried.”

“And?” Gavrila asked.

Dmitri didn’t answer directly. He simply took a slow sip of ale.

Gavrila’s brows rose. “Say no more. To your health, Brother Dmitri.”

They drank. The tavern’s warmth pressed in, and Dmitri let it. He listened to Gavrila’s jokes and Anfisa’s sharp comments. He let the smoke and ale and human voices fill the hollow places the road had carved into him.

For a little while, the empire felt less like a burden and more like a living thing—huge, messy, laughing, trading, singing under a mountain pass.

And somewhere in the back of his mind, the deadline still ticked.

End of March.

Magog.

Azim Khan.

But for this one hour, in Sagatin’s tavern, Dmitri allowed himself to be only a traveler among travelers, sharing warmth and words before the road demanded him again.

Dmitri did not linger in Sagatin.

He went upstairs after the last pipe-draw, placed the wrapped History beside his head as if it were an icon, and slept until morning with the kind of heavy, grateful sleep that only a road-weary body can take.

At dawn he ate like a man who meant to spend the day outrunning the calendar.

He ordered a full platter—lamb again, this time stewed longer so it fell apart under the spoon, with potatoes softened in broth and onions sweetened by slow heat. Bread, thick and still warm. A whole mug of water first, then a smaller mug of ale to finish. When he stood, his muscles complained—but there was strength in him again.

He paid, nodded to the keeper, and went back to the stable.

The horse was fed, brushed, and calmer than Dmitri felt. He swung up, tightened straps, and pushed out into the pass, riding hard as the morning mist lifted off stone.

The Lucomoryn plains opened wide and bright—flat land that let the wind run unbroken, grass still pale from winter but beginning to show green at its roots. Here the road belonged to caravans. Tracks braided together, old wheel ruts layered over newer ones, hoofprints stamped into the earth like repeated seals.

By midday he saw smoke columns ahead—many of them—and then the caravan camp itself, spread like a temporary city.

Tents in rows. Wagons in circles. Fires. Livestock. Children running between men mending harness straps. A smith's corner where someone hammered iron with a steady, ringing beat. The air was thick with cooking smells—fat, smoke, and something sour-sweet brewing in barrels.

Serpanow, he thought—Gavrila's "moving city."

He did not stop long, but he did not pass it by like a ghost either. A camp of three thousand was safer than sleeping alone on the plain.

He rode in at a controlled pace, showed his monk's cord and imperial coins, and found a place near the edge where a cluster of wagons formed a windbreak. A guard with a spear looked him over, saw the Bible tucked inside the robe fold, and relaxed a fraction.

"You traveling alone, батюшка?" the guard asked.

"Alone," Dmitri said. "To Magog."

The guard whistled softly. "Then sleep where you can hear people breathe. Wolves don't like crowds."

Dmitri nodded. "Neither do men."

The guard grinned, as if that were the truest joke in the world, and waved him through.

That night Dmitri slept with the murmur of the camp around him—voices, a baby crying once, a dog barking at something that never came close. He ate a bowl of barley porridge traded for a single coin, drank water, and kept his sword under his blanket. The History stayed strapped to him even in sleep. Habit had become law.

The next day, riding out early, he saw it from far off: a dark, enormous spread on the horizon like a storm that had decided to camp on the earth.

The Horde.

Tents and lines and banners. Herds. Watchfires. Moving dots that were men and horses—thousands upon thousands, too many to count without despair. Even at distance, the camp had the shape of discipline, not chaos: rings of perimeter riders, clustered command tents, patrols threading the outskirts.

He had heard of them—people spoke of this formation the way they spoke of rivers: as something that existed whether or not you wished it.

The Cassin Horde, they said. Seventy thousand strong, guarding the land between plains and mountains, ready to ride wherever the Cossack troops were needed. The local Khan—Kimr—held it like a clenched fist.

Dmitri reined in on a rise and watched a moment, the wind snapping at his cloak. Somewhere within that mass, messengers would be riding, orders moving like blood through veins. He remembered reading that the descendants of the regular Russian troops—the Horde—had endured through time as Cossack troops, not as runaway serfs but as a true military inheritance . Seeing the camp now, it felt less like a theory and more like a living wall.

He did not approach. He had no time to speak. No time to be questioned. No time to explain why a monk carried a sword and a sealed book.

He clicked his tongue and drove his horse onward, skirting the far edge of the horizon-storm until it lay behind him.

Seventy thousand, he thought.

Four days later, road dust ground into his boots and his back feeling like old rope, he reached the Kolmac forest.

It was not like Cazan. The approach alone was different.

Here the road ran wide and clean, cut and maintained—tree limbs trimmed back, brush cleared, travelable even for a broad wagon. The forest itself was still thick, but it felt watched by law rather than owned by hunger. Markers stood at intervals—carved posts with imperial signs, some bearing the double-headed eagle in worn relief.

Even so, Dmitri did not trust trees.

He rode until evening, then chose a campsite deliberately: not too close to the road, not too deep into brush, with a line of sight in at least two directions. He made a fire—small but steady—and set stones around it to keep it contained. He tied his horse, checked the animal’s hooves, then sat with the warmth at his knees and the sword within reach.

This was the farthest he had ever been.

He stared into the flames and, without meaning to, drifted into the oldest landscape he knew—memory.

I am a Novgorod boy, he told himself. *Born among stone and bell music.*

He remembered his father’s hands—priest hands, clean but strong, smelling of incense and ink. He remembered his mother at her loom, hair bound up, fingers moving faster than his eyes could follow, making cloth that merchants praised as if it were magic.

They had been merchants before they were “respectable.” Not the loud kind—no shouting in the market. The patient kind: buying raw hides brought by traders, soaking and scraping and tanning

until leather became something supple and valuable; weaving cloth so tight it could turn wind. Their house always smelled of bark steeped in water and of clean linen drying.

He had grown up between altar and workshop, between prayer and craft.

And then—books.

The empire’s books.

When he was young, he had believed monks were holy because they were silent. Later he learned the truth: monks were dangerous because they remembered.

He had entered the monastery for that danger. For the shelves. For the manuscripts. For the places where history was kept like fire under ash.

And for the central book—the one everyone kissed but few truly read.

The small Bible pressed against his chest felt heavier tonight than it had in Sagatin. He pulled it out, looked at the worn clasp, then did not open it. He didn’t need to.

In his mind he saw the story as he’d come to understand it: not a sky-mystery, but an imperial chronicle.

Christ—Andronikos.

A man of blood and law, not a floating spirit. Born, lived, ruled, tried to change an empire, and was executed—crucified—around 1185 on the hill by the Bosphorus, near Constantinopol, that true Jerusalem of the old chronicles . Dmitri had read how names like Rome and Jerusalem were not fixed points but imperial titles, carried from capital to capital as power moved, Tartaria is the original Jerusalem and true Rome is Alexandria in Egypt . He had read the fact that Babylon was the capital in Egypt —and Egypt itself, in the old language of the empire, was not merely a land but a great necropolis of rulers, a place where memory and burial mixed with statecraft. Bible at first was a history book of the empire, meant to write down history of kings, with Christ as Andronikos I Komnenos, who was born at the time when Constantinopol was in Iesus. 152 AD, the Sultanate of Rum (Seljuk Turks). The region of Anatolia was ruled by the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum, a powerful Turkish Muslim state that controlled most of central and eastern Anatolia. The sultan at the time was Mas'ud I. It was all part of massive Tartaria Empire. Tartaria spans from Siberia to Europe, from upper north to Egypt. In I.350, Anatolia is ruled by the early Ottoman Beylik — a rising Turkish principality founded by Osman I around I.299. By I.350, under Sultan Orhan, the Ottomans control much of northwest Anatolia and are beginning to expand into Europe. In I.350 it is the Ottoman Beylik (a powerful Tartaria state).

To Dmitri, these were not “religious curiosities.” They were a map.

And yet, he knew how the map had been turned into a cage.

At some point, the history book had been treated as something else. Not a record, but a spellbook. Not a chronicle, but a god. Sects had formed, each bowing in its own way, each insisting the book was about invisible heavens rather than the empire’s real wounds and victories. Dmitri had once felt disgust at it—*corpse worship,* he had called it in his private thoughts, watching men press their lips to images and plead as if pleading could rewrite what had already happened.

Later, he had found a quieter meaning.

Not “religion” the way tavern men used the word—rules and fear and gestures.

For him, Christianity was remembrance.

Respect for the Khan’s order, for the empire’s unity, for the fact that history was made by men who bled and died and still built roads. The Bible, in his hands, was not a ladder to clouds. It was the empire’s mirror.

And he—he was not truly a monk, not in the way novices imagined.

He was a historian wearing a monk’s robe because robes opened doors that swords could not.

Dmitri fed another twig into the fire. It snapped, threw sparks, and settled.

“Magog,” he said quietly, tasting the name like a vow.

Somewhere out there, Azim Khan waited. Somewhere, a deadline waited. Somewhere, other eyes might be counting copies.

He lay down on the moss, blanket pulled tight, sword near his hand, the wrapped History strapped close as if it were part of his ribs.

Above him, Kolmac forest stood silent—wide road, clean path, and dark trees that never promised anything at all.

Dmitri slept in fits, the way a man sleeps when the world has already shown him teeth. The fire burned low, collapsing inward on itself, its light shrinking until the forest pressed close again—dark trunks, deeper shadow, a ceiling of branches that swallowed moonlight.

Then came a sound at his boots.

A wet, deliberate sniff.

Dmitri’s eyes snapped open. For a heartbeat he did not move, not even to breathe. The road had taught him: the first motion is often the last mistake.

Another sniff—closer. Hot breath on leather.

His hand slid toward the sword.

Firelight flared weakly as a coal shifted, and the darkness in front of him resolved into shapes.

Wolves.

Not one. A pack.

They stood around the edge of the dying light like a ring of judgment—gray backs, low shoulders, eyes catching the ember-glow in hard points. Some held their heads level, testing him. Some had lips pulled back to show teeth. One snarled quietly, the sound low enough to be felt more than heard.

Dmitri rose to a crouch, blanket falling away. Cold air bit his face. His heartbeat hammered, but his mind was strangely clear.

Not bandits. Not men. Simpler. Worse.

He dragged the sword free—

A larger wolf launched itself at him.

Dmitri barely had time to turn. The animal hit like a thrown log. He jammed his forearm up, felt teeth scrape leather, and with his other hand drove a fist into the wolf's snout as hard as he could.

Bone met bone.

The wolf yelped—a sharp, surprised sound—and fell back, shaking its head.

"Ha!" Dmitri barked, more anger than triumph. "Not today."

He scrambled up fully, sword angled low, point forward. The wolves shifted, circling, stepping in and out of the weak light as if the fire were a boundary line they debated crossing.

Then Dmitri saw movement at the edge of camp.

One wolf had peeled away, silent as smoke, heading for the horse.

His horse.

The animal snorted in panic, hooves stamping once.

Dmitri's voice tore out of him like a command to troops.

"NO!"

He lunged, boots slipping on needles, and put himself between the wolf and the tethered horse. The wolf froze a few paces away, head low, eyes fixed on the easy meal it wanted.

"Back," Dmitri growled, though he knew the beast did not understand words. "Back!"

Two other wolves rushed him from the side, faster than thought—gray streaks, snapping jaws.

Dmitri pivoted, letting the first pass his blade line, then drove the sword into its torso with a brutal, practiced motion that surprised even him. The wolf's body jolted, a grunt like a cough escaping it as it twisted away.

The second wolf darted in for his leg. Dmitri slashed downward and felt the blade bite into flesh. The wolf screamed and hopped back, dragging a wounded limb.

The pack hesitated.

Dmitri stood panting, sword up, back half-turned so he could guard both the horse and the fire. His shoulder burned. His knuckles ached from the punch. The air smelled of wet fur and blood—hot iron in the cold.

He shouted into the trees, voice raw and furious, as if his words could strike as surely as steel.

"Get lost! Get lost, you beasts of dark!"

The wolves circled once more, testing, judging. The larger one—the one he'd punched—stared at him with something like hate, then flicked its ears and stepped back.

A moment later, as if a single thought had passed through them all, the pack dissolved into the forest. Shapes turned into shadows. Shadows turned into nothing.

Silence returned—thicker than before.

Dmitri stayed standing for a long time, sword still raised, listening for the sound of paws. Only when his horse's breathing steadied did he lower the blade. He checked the tether, stroked the horse's neck with a shaking hand, murmuring.

"Easy… easy… we're alive."

The fire was nearly dead. The forest was awake.

Sleep would not come again. Not now.

He stamped out what remained of the coals—careful, because a monk did not leave fire to wander—then packed in haste, hands moving quickly despite soreness. He mounted before the cold could settle into his bones and rode out while the sky was still black.

The road accepted him without comment.

By the time pale morning light filtered through branches, he had put distance behind him—enough that he could breathe without imagining yellow eyes behind every trunk.

He entered the Cavona forest as daylight strengthened.

This place felt different: wetter, older, with a quiet that belonged to water rather than to waiting teeth. The road ran near a lake—dark, smooth, ringed by reeds and leaning trees.

Dmitri reined in.

His robe was stiff with dried sweat and road dust. His hands smelled faintly of blood, no matter how often he wiped them.

He dismounted, unbuckled the leather cuirass, set the sword within reach, and walked into the lake.

The water was cold enough to steal breath. He hissed, then forced himself deeper until it reached his waist, then his chest. He splashed water over his face and hair, scrubbed at his beard, worked dirt out from under his nails.

It felt like washing off a second skin—the road's grime, the forest's fear.

He closed his eyes and, in his mind, formed words the way he would in the monastery—quiet, shaped, controlled.

Not the prayer of a man begging a distant heaven.

A vow spoken to the empire that had made his road, his language, his books.

Great are you, Khan, he thought, each phrase measured like a line of script.
Protect our land. Protect the Great Empire.
Your throne is almighty. You are strongest, proven in wars of old.
Our people are your servants. The Empire stands strong.

He opened his eyes to the lake’s surface—flat, reflecting the pale sky—and for a moment he felt steadier.

When he came out, water streamed from his beard and sleeves. He shook like a dog once, grimacing at the cold, then dressed again and gathered a few dry sticks.

A small fire, this time—safe enough in daylight.

He took out his hook and line, found a straight stick, and wrapped the rope around it. He baited the hook with a strip of dried fish—ironic, feeding fish to fish, but the road was full of ironies. He cast into the lake and waited.

Waiting always brought thinking.

He watched the line tremble in the breeze and let his mind drift—toward the empire he loved, toward the vastness of it.

From Novgorod’s bells to the Horde’s camps, from plains to mountains, from forests that hid wolves to cities that held cannons like monuments—one rule, one banner, one language braided from many tongues. A single body made of countless limbs.

We are held together by roads and books, he thought. *By memory. Without memory, we become tribes again. Without books, every governor becomes a king and every king becomes a liar.*

The line jerked.

Dmitri’s hand tightened. He pulled, careful, and felt resistance—alive, strong.

A fish broke the surface, thrashing, silver-green in the light. Not huge, but solid—enough meat for a man who’d been chased by wolves and deadlines alike.

“Thank you,” he murmured, not sure to whom.

He killed it cleanly, then roasted it over the fire, turning it slowly until the skin blistered and the flesh whitened and flaked. The smell made his stomach wake sharply. He ate with his fingers, careful of bones, and drank water afterward until the salt on his tongue eased.

As he ate, he thought of his parents—unbidden, sudden.

His father, the priest, voice steady at the altar, never raising it in anger even when boys were foolish. His mother, the weaver, humming as she worked, her hands always busy, always creating something that would outlast the day.

He touched the cross at his neck.

The metal was worn smooth where his fingers often found it. To others it meant salvation in the next world. To Dmitri it meant the empire’s history—Andronikos, the chronicles, the long chain of kings and khans that had built the present.

He pictured his own face reflected faintly in the lake water: forty-five years old. Youth behind him like a road already traveled. Hair thinning in spots, beard thick and dark, eyes still sharp despite fatigue. A monk by robe, a keeper by duty, a historian by hunger.

He closed his eyes and offered a quieter prayer—one he did not shape for khans or empire, but for the people who had put him on the path of books in the first place.

Father, Mother, he thought. *May you be remembered.*
May your work and your hands not vanish.
If I keep the empire's history alive, I keep a piece of you alive too.

The wind moved through the trees. The lake lapped softly at the shore.

Dmitri finished the last bite, wiped his hands on moss, doused the fire, and repacked with the careful rhythm of a man who had learned that carelessness was paid for in blood.

He looked once more down the road between the trees.

Magog still waited.

The end of March still waited.

And Dmitri, Keeper and traveler, swung back into the saddle and rode on—loving his empire the way a man loves a vast thing that can shelter him, feed him, and yet still demand everything.

Dmitri rode on with the clean taste of lake water still in his mouth and the memory of wolves still lodged like splinters in the back of his mind.

Six hours later the road delivered him to Naiman.

It was a small town—tight streets, low houses, smoke curling from chimneys, a palisade that looked more ceremonial than defensive. The place had the feel of a waystation for those who didn't love the road but had to live with it. Travelers moved through in steady trickles: a cart of turnips, two men with bows, a woman leading a stubborn goat.

Dmitri made straight for the tavern.

Inside, it was warm and cozy in the way only small taverns can be—low ceiling, thick beams, benches polished smooth by generations of elbows. The air smelled of stew, beer, wet wool drying near the hearth. He picked a table where he could see the door and ordered without hesitation.

Pork first—thick cuts roasted until the outside crisped, the inside still juicy, laid over potatoes and carrots and other vegetables cooked soft in their own sweetness. Steam rose in heavy curls. He ate like a hungry traveler, not like a monk: tearing bread, scooping vegetables, letting fat warm him from the inside out.

Then came fish soup—clear broth with herbs, pieces of river fish flaking at the touch, onions and pepper warming the throat. He drank it slowly, the way you drink something that makes your body remember it is not made of iron.

For dessert, fried apples, browned in butter and honey, served with goat milk yoghurt—tart and cool, cutting through the sweetness. Dmitri scraped the bowl clean, then realized only after that he'd eaten as if someone might steal the meal from him.

He leaned back, exhaled, and for the first time in days felt almost… safe.

That was when the music reached him.

At the far end of the room a local musician sat on a stool, half in shadow. He played a jew harp—small, bright twangs that pulsed like a heartbeat—while his other hand drifted over a zither laid across his lap. The strings hummed and shimmered. And when he sang, his voice rose clean and godly, filling the little tavern as if it were a cathedral.

The noise of mugs and talk softened around the music. Even men who looked like they'd bite each other for coin listened with their mouths half-open.

Dmitri felt the melody catch in him.

For a while the road vanished.

He saw distant lands as if the song itself painted them: plains where banners moved like clouds, cities with iron bells, caravans on riverbanks, mountain passes lit by watchfires. He imagined peoples he'd never met speaking in the empire's braided tongue, all threads in the same tapestry.

So wide, he thought, drifting. *So much held together.*

Then a mug thumped somewhere, too loud. A man laughed. The spell broke.

Dmitri blinked and found himself back at his table, hands resting on wood, pipe smoke curling overhead. He felt oddly embarrassed, as if someone had seen him dreaming with his eyes open.

He paid, took a room, and slept soundly—true sleep, deep and unbroken, the kind that felt like a gift.

In the morning he ate again—porridge this time, thick and plain, with water and a pinch of salt. Simple fuel. He tightened his straps, checked the History bundle, and set back on the road.

By evening the land rose into the mountains of Bars Col.

The place darkened even before the sun fully set. Partly dim woodland clung to slopes, the trees sparse and twisted. Sharp rocks jutted like broken teeth. The road ran between stone and shadow, and the wind that lived there carried a cold edge that felt older than any season.

His horse grew restless, tossing its head, snorting as if it smelled something Dmitri could not.

"Easy," Dmitri murmured, stroking the neck. "Easy, brother. We have road yet."

But the animal's ears kept flicking, and its steps became quicker, less certain.

After an hour of riding through that uneasy gloom, Dmitri dismounted to stretch his legs. His back had begun to knot from long hours in saddle. He led the horse a few paces, found a rock that offered some shelter from the wind, and sat to rest, rolling his shoulders carefully.

The forest around him was too quiet again.

No tavern laughter. No birdsong. Only the thin hiss of wind through branches and the occasional clack of stone shifting under the horse's hoof.

Then—movement.

Dmitri's eyes caught it first as a wrongness in the distance between trees.

A figure stood out there.

Goat-like.

A black, hairy humanoid body—thick with coarse fur, shoulders hunched. Goat horns curved from its head, framing a face that was not quite animal and not quite man. It stood on its hind legs with an unnatural steadiness, as if it had practiced being upright.

It stared at him.

Yellow eyes—sickly, pale gold, like old fat in a cold pot—fixed on Dmitri without blinking. At times its mouth opened and a long tongue came out, panting, wet and obscene, then slid back in as the mouth closed again.

The creature crouched slightly.

And Dmitri could swear—could *swear*—that it was smiling.

A cold, eerie feeling ran through his stomach. Fear rose up his throat like bile. His skin prickled, hair standing up on his arms beneath the robe. His breath shortened. His heart hammered hard enough to hurt.

“By the Devil,” he whispered.

His hand trembled as he crossed himself, touching forehead first, then chest—more reflex than theology, a gesture hammered into childhood by a priest-father’s stern hand.

The horse snorted sharply and stepped back, eyes rolling.

Dmitri couldn’t move. He couldn’t look away.

The creature’s smile widened—or seemed to. The tongue flicked out once more. It held the stare as if tasting him with its eyes.

Then it let out a massive screech.

The sound ripped through the dim woods like torn metal—high, wet, and wrong, raising gooseflesh along Dmitri’s spine. It was not a wolf’s cry. Not a man’s scream. Not anything he could name.

And then it ran.

Not away down the road, but into the forest—vanishing between trunks with startling speed, black fur swallowing into shadow as if the trees had opened to receive it.

Dmitri realized he was breathing in short gasps. A tear had formed in one eye without his permission, either from fear or from the cold wind or from the sheer shock of seeing something that did not belong in any book he trusted.

He stood too quickly, nearly stumbling, and grabbed the reins.

“Go,” he hissed at the horse, voice breaking. “Go!”

He mounted in a single frantic motion and drove the animal into a gallop—then faster, as fast as the narrow road allowed. The empty dark forest road stretched ahead, twisting between rock and dim trees, and he rode as if the screech itself were chasing him.

No one in sight.

Silence again, except for the thunder of hooves and his own ragged breath.

He did not slow for anything. Not for stones. Not for turns. Not for the ache in his shoulder. He kept one hand tight on the reins and the other pressed instinctively to the strap holding the History close, as if the book could protect him from things with horns and yellow eyes.

It was real, his mind insisted. *I saw it. I saw it.*

And then another thought, colder and more frightening:

If such things exist on the road, what else exists?

Five hours later the land began to open. The dark slopes fell behind him. The wind changed. The trees thinned and then were gone, replaced by wide space and lower grass.

He emerged onto the plain of Carocoran.

The relief hit him so hard his hands shook on the reins. He slowed the horse to a hard trot, then to a walk, letting the animal breathe, letting himself breathe.

The sky here felt bigger, the darkness less suffocating. In the distance, faint lights hinted at settlements—lanterns, watchfires, something human.

Magog was not far away now.

Dmitri swallowed and forced his voice into steadiness, speaking to himself as much as the horse.

“Forward,” he said. “Only forward.”

But even as the plain stretched wide and open, he could still hear that screech in the back of his skull, and he found himself glancing at the horizon as if he expected horns to rise from the grass.

He touched the cross at his neck once—metal cold against his fingers.

Not a charm. Not a superstition.

A reminder: empire, history, order.

And he rode on toward Magog, keeping his schedule—not because he was fearless, but because he had learned the road’s hard truth:

Fear did not shorten distance. Only hooves did.

Magog

In a couple of hours the plain began to show signs of city life—milestones more frequent, patrol posts, carts heading the opposite way with stamped seals on their cargo. Dmitri felt the tension that had lived between his shoulders for days finally ease.

Then Magog rose ahead.

Not as a rough border town, not as a mere fort, but as a true city of the Mongul khaganate—broad and confident, built as if its builders had never doubted the empire would last. Sunlight caught stone and metal and turned the place bright even under a cool sky.

Magog's streets were wide and clean. Big stone houses stood in solid rows, their facades carved with geometric bands and floral patterns. Between them rose towers—some square, some round—capped with shining elements that flashed when clouds shifted. Churches stood proud among the civic halls, onion domes gilded and luminous, crosses glinting like small spears of light. Many houses were painted boldly: deep red, bright blue, and blended colors that made entire streets look like woven cloth laid across earth.

People here looked well-fed and well-dressed. Nobility moved openly in furs and embroidered coats, but even the craftsmen wore good boots and belts with polished buckles. Carriages rolled past, wheels bound in iron, horses braided and decorated. The air smelled of baked bread, smoked meat, and city smoke—busy, prosperous smoke.

And there was light.

Not merely torches and lanterns, but electric lamps set on posts and hung in certain archways—glass globes faintly shimmering even in daylight. Dmitri saw the mechanisms he had heard about in travelers' tales: metal poles rising high on rooftops and towers, gathering charge from the air; gear housings and transformer boxes mounted beneath eaves; wires running in neat lines along walls and down into junction points that fed neighborhoods. The city hummed with an unseen web.

At the center of the main square stood a colossal stone pillar, thicker than a man's embrace and towering into the sky—fifteen meters at least. Its surface was carved with scenes and symbols: banners, mounted riders, cities, stars, and long strings of script that looked like a history made into stone. People passed it as casually as if it were a well, but Dmitri slowed his horse and stared.

This is what power looks like when it expects to be remembered, he thought.

He rode toward the square and approached a woman in a long dress of dark blue cloth, her hair covered with a fine scarf. She carried herself with the calm authority of someone who belonged here.

"Forgive me," Dmitri said, inclining his head. "Where is the Khan's palace?"

She glanced at his robe, his sword, the wrapped bundle he guarded too carefully for it to be mere luggage. Her eyes sharpened a fraction, but her voice remained polite.

"Follow the avenue past the pillar," she said, pointing with two fingers rather than a whole hand. "You'll see the outer gardens first—walls with white stone and statues. Keep to the right, cross the second bridge over the canal, and you'll reach the inner gatehouse. The guards will direct you."

Dmitri nodded. "Thank you. May the day treat you kindly."

"And you, traveler," she replied, and returned to her path without curiosity, as if cities taught people that questions were sometimes dangerous.

Dmitri rode on.

The palace revealed itself not as a single building but as a fortified estate—walls and towers, yes, but softened by elegance. Gardens spread outward with trimmed trees and patterned flower beds, water channels cut cleanly through stone, small bridges arcing over them. Statues stood at intervals: khans, saints, eagles, lions, figures whose faces had been carved stern enough to command obedience even from rain and wind.

Servants moved everywhere, quick and practiced, carrying baskets, sweeping paths, lifting water, tending plants. The place felt like a machine that ran on human hands.

Dmitri reached the gate of the inner section and reined in.

Twelve guards stood there in armor so polished it seemed to hold the sky's reflection. They didn't shift. They didn't fidget. They watched the way a blade watches—silent and ready.

Two stepped forward.

"Business," one said.

Dmitri dismounted and kept his posture humble—chin lowered, hands visible, no sudden movements. He was a monk, but here even monks were measured like potential threats.

"I have a special delivery for the Khan," Dmitri said. "A book ordered from Novgorod. I have traveled almost two weeks to bring it."

The guard's gaze went to the bundle.

"Show."

Dmitri loosened the strap and lifted the wrapped History with both hands. He peeled back the outer linen just enough to show the cover and the seal mark—no more. One guard took it, weighed it, turned it slightly, then nodded to the other.

They exchanged a brief look—professional, not impressed.

"You may pass," the guard said, returning it with care that surprised Dmitri. Even soldiers understood the value of paper when it carried power.

Dmitri remounted and rode through the inner gatehouse into a courtyard that felt like a smaller city—arched walkways, carved pillars, patterned stone floors, fountains flowing as if water itself were wealthy.

He dismounted again near the main hall. Four more guards approached immediately, closer than the first. Their eyes were sharper. Their questions came in a quick sequence.

"Name."

"Brother Dmitri."

"From?"

"Novgorod the Great. Monastery of Holy Trinity of her Mother Mary."

"To whom?"

"Khan Azim."

“What is in the bundle?”

“A copy of imperial history, ordered by the Khan.”

One guard searched him thoroughly—hands checking belt, armor straps, boots. Another examined the Bible tucked inside his robe fold, then let it be. When they were satisfied, they stepped aside.

“Enter.”

Dmitri took a breath and walked into the palace hall.

He had never seen such a place.

Massive arches rose overhead like the ribs of some great beast made of stone and gold. Domes gleamed with intricate patterns—stars, vines, knotwork—so detailed it hurt to follow with the eyes. Walls were dressed in carved panels and colored stone. Thick carpets softened every step. Expensive wood furniture—dark, polished, inlaid—stood like quiet witnesses of wealth.

Servants moved silently, as if trained not to make the building feel less grand by admitting they were human.

Dmitri felt very small.

A servant approached, bowed, and guided him along corridors that curved and opened, past doors guarded by men who didn’t blink, past hanging lamps and sculpted reliefs. Finally the servant stopped before a larger chamber and gestured.

“Khan Azim.”

Dmitri entered.

Azim Khan sat on a golden throne, one leg relaxed, the other set as if he could rise in an instant. He smoked—something fragrant and strong—and sipped from a cup that caught light like glass. Around him, attendants lounged on carpets and cushions; servants stood ready, swinging large paper fans in slow steady arcs to cool the air. Nearby tables held a feast—fruit, meats, breads, shining dishes arranged like offerings.

The Khan’s eyes settled on Dmitri.

They were not warm eyes. Not cruel either. Simply eyes that expected the world to obey.

Dmitri approached with careful steps, then knelt and held the bundle forward.

“Great Khan Azim,” he said, voice steady despite the pounding in his chest. “I have brought you the book ordered from Novgorod Monastery of Holy Trinity of her Mother Mary.”

Azim Khan made a small gesture.

A servant hurried forward, trembling slightly, took the book from Dmitri’s hands, and presented it to the Khan. Azim opened it, leafed through several pages with practiced speed, scanning the lines as if searching for flaws. He paused once, then once more, then closed it and set it aside without ceremony—as if confirming a tool had been delivered.

Then the Khan rose.

The movement shifted the entire room's attention like a tide. Azim walked down from the throne and stopped before Dmitri, who remained kneeling with his head lowered.

Azim placed a hand on Dmitri's shoulder.

The hand was heavy, steady—more like a seal than a touch.

"You are reliable," Azim said. His voice was calm, but it carried. "The history of the Empire is important to be preserved."

Dmitri kept his eyes low. "At your service, Great Khan."

Azim's hand remained on his shoulder as he spoke, as if holding Dmitri in place with authority alone.

"There are forces in the western lands rising who do not look kindly toward the east," the Khan continued. "Men try to write their own treatises in the west—against our empire. Men are being killed. Not all books are safe."

Dmitri felt a cold thread in his gut. *So Kirill's questions weren't only monastic fuss.*

"You made a dangerous journey," Azim said. "It seems it went well."

Dmitri did not answer. In a room like this, silence was safer than words.

"I have another request for you."

Azim gestured.

A servant hurried in with a second book—this one wrapped more carefully, sealed with cord. Azim took it and held it a moment as if weighing not its mass but its consequences.

"This must be delivered to Alil Khan in Chinese Tartaria," Azim said. "To Hoyam city."

Dmitri lifted his head slightly, eyes widening before he could stop them.

Azim's gaze sharpened with faint amusement. "Yes. Another copy of history—this time of the old kings of the empire and their bloodlines. Only trusted persons can carry it."

Dmitri swallowed. His mouth felt dry.

"You will not travel alone," Azim added. "Six guards will accompany you until you reach the city. It is not far—five days, if the road behaves."

Five days.

After everything he had just endured, five days sounded like mercy and threat at once.

Azim clapped his hands once.

A servant ran forward as if chased, holding a coin pouch with both hands. He presented it to Dmitri with shaking fingers.

Dmitri's instinct rose immediately—refuse. He was a monk. He served the empire. Payment felt like selling obedience.

But nobody refused a Khan.

Dmitri accepted the pouch with both hands, then bowed lower.

“I did it for the empire,” he said carefully. “At your service, Great Khan Azim. No payment needed.”

Azim smiled slightly—the kind of smile that meant he heard the words and dismissed the sentiment.

“Good,” the Khan said, already turning away. “Go. Rest. Be ready.”

He returned to his throne, sank into it, lifted his cup, and inhaled from his smoke again as if Dmitri’s existence had already become a matter of administration.

Servants guided Dmitri back through the halls. He was given a place to sit—an unbelievably comfortable wooden chair with carved arms, set near a corridor where guards stood like statues.

He waited in silence, hands resting on his knees, feeling the new sealed book’s weight even before it was placed in his care. His mind kept circling the Khan’s warning.

Men are being killed. Not all books are safe.

After some time, another servant approached and bowed.

“Brother Dmitri,” the servant said. “Be at the city watch quarters tomorrow at noon. Six guards will accompany you.”

Dmitri nodded. “I will be there.”

He was released from the palace with the politeness reserved for useful tools. Outside, Magog’s air felt brighter, as if the palace had its own atmosphere of pressure and gold.

He found the city’s best guesthouse without difficulty—Magog advertised comfort the way lesser places advertised survival. There he ate a good meal—bread, stew, pickled vegetables, and a cup of strong tea that tasted of smoke and herbs—then went to his room.

He set both books close—the delivered one now out of his hands, the new sealed one soon to be his burden—and lay down fully clothed out of habit.

As sleep came, one thought repeated itself like a line he could not stop copying:

If books are not safe… then neither are the men who carry them.

Dmitri woke before the city did.

For a moment he lay still, listening to Magog’s muffled sounds through the guesthouse walls: a distant wagon wheel, a door latch, the murmur of voices in the courtyard. His body felt heavier than it had in Sagatin—safe bed heaviness, the kind that made a man want to sleep a day and let the road go on without him.

But the Khan’s words were already awake in his mind.

Only trusted persons can carry it.

He sat up, touched the cross at his neck—cold metal against warm skin—then swung his legs off the bed and stood.

Downstairs, he ate steadily: bread, a bowl of thick stew, and hot tea that tasted of herbs and smoke. He didn't linger over flavor today. The meal was fuel, nothing more. When he finished, he went to wash—face, hands, beard—scrubbing until his skin stung. The mirror in the washroom showed him what he usually avoided: a forty-five-year-old man with thinning hair at the crown, a thick dark beard shot through with a few lighter strands, eyes that looked older than they should.

He looked like a monk. He did not feel like one.

He returned upstairs, took his bundle and the new sealed book with both hands, and checked the cords twice. He slipped the small Bible inside his robe fold again, then belted his sword and tightened the leather armor beneath his cloak.

Outside, his horse waited where he had left it, head lowered, tail flicking lazily. Dmitri stroked its neck, spoke softly, and mounted.

By the time the sun climbed higher, he was galloping through Magog's streets toward the city watch quarters, aiming to arrive before noon.

Magog moved around him like a living machine—carriages, well-dressed merchants, patrol riders in polished metal, the faint hum of wires and mechanisms overhead. A street lamp flickered once as if breathing. Dmitri kept his eyes forward and his hands steady.

At the watch quarters—stone building, iron-bound doors, banner above the entry—he reined in, dismounted, and walked inside with the sealed book held close.

The room smelled of leather and sweat and oil. Armor stood on racks. Spears leaned in ordered bundles. A man at a side table hammered something small and metallic, not even looking up.

Behind the main desk sat a giant.

He was a Cossack so broad that he looked carved from oak. His hands were enormous—palms like shovel blades, knuckles like stones. A thick mustache framed a mouth that seemed built for shouting across battlefields. He stared at Dmitri like a man evaluating a horse's teeth.

The giant rumbled, voice low enough to vibrate the desk. "You must be the courier."

Dmitri bowed slightly. "Brother Dmitri. Yes."

The Cossack leaned forward, eyes narrowing. "I will give you six of our best men. They will accompany you on your travel."

His gaze dropped to Dmitri's belt. "I see you carry a sword. Where did you serve?"

Dmitri kept his posture respectful, but he did not shrink. "I went through training in Novgorod when I was twenty-five," he said. "As the whole male population does for city defense. I am not good as Horde warriors, of course… but I can handle the blade."

For a heartbeat the giant's face was unreadable.

Then he rumbled a laugh—deep and rolling, like stones tumbling down a slope.

“Handle the blade,” he repeated, amused. He stood up, and the desk suddenly looked smaller. He walked around it with heavy steps, stopping close enough that Dmitri could smell leather and tobacco on him.

The Cossack lifted one massive hand, pinched Dmitri’s right arm as if testing a roast, and squeezed.

Pain flared bright and immediate.

“I can break it with one snap,” the giant said, cheerful as if discussing weather.

Dmitri clenched his teeth and managed not to flinch away. “I believe you.”

The Cossack released him, then—shockingly—patted Dmitri on the head like a father patting a stubborn son.

“Good,” he said. “Then you believe truth.”

He leaned back and whistled—loud and sharp, a sound that cut the room in half.

From the next room, boots thundered.

Six Cossacks came running and skidded into a straight line as if yanked by an invisible rope. They snapped to attention, fists to chests, chins up, eyes forward.

They yelled their names, each voice like a hammer strike:

“Stepan!”

“Yaromir!”

“Venedikt!”

“Gleb!”

“Bogdan!”

“Radomir!”

The giant nodded, satisfied.

He turned back to Dmitri. “Afanasi,” he said, tapping his own chest as if Dmitri should already know. “Now listen.”

Afanasi faced the six men, his voice dropping into the tone of orders.

“There is a special delivery to make on the Khan’s command,” he said. “A precious book. You guard it with your lives. You will escort Brother Dmitri to Alil Khan in Hoyam city. No delays. No drinking on duty. No gambling your boots away in roadside taverns.”

Bogdan muttered under his breath, “Then what’s the point of being alive?”

Afanasi’s head snapped toward him. “The point is: if you fail, you’ll wish you were dead.”

All six straightened another fraction. Even Bogdan shut his mouth.

Stepan barked, “Understood!”

The others echoed, “Understood!”

Afanasi nodded once, then waved his hand like a gate opening. “Stables. Now.”

The men moved at once, a practiced blur—no arguing, no swagger. Dmitri followed, still feeling the ache in his arm where the giant had pinched him.

In the stable yard, the Cossacks chose their horses with the quick eyes of men who lived in saddles: strong legs, good lungs, calm temper. In a couple of minutes they were ready—helmets strapped, belts tightened, spears and sabers in place. One of them, Radomir, glanced at Dmitri’s monk robe and leather armor and grinned.

“You’re a strange priest,” Radomir said. “Do you bless men or stab them?”

Dmitri mounted and adjusted the sealed book’s strap. “Depends on the man.”

That earned laughter.

They rode out of Magog in a tight group, six riders forming a moving wall around Dmitri without needing to be told. At the gates, guards saluted quickly; the double-headed eagle banner snapped in the warmer wind.

The weather had shifted—spring turning bold. The air felt almost hot in the sun. Dmitri’s cloak grew heavy. He loosened it and took a long drink from his waterskin, water cool against his tongue.

On the road, the Cossacks’ mood loosened the way it always did once the city fell behind and the plains opened.

Yaromir rode up alongside Dmitri, smirking. “So, Brother Keeper,” he said, “is it true Novgorod girls have thighs like bread loaves?”

Gleb snorted. “You’ve never seen a bread loaf, Yaromir. Only ale barrels.”

Radomir laughed. “I heard Magog girls wear perfume so strong it makes a man confess sins he never committed.”

Bogdan leaned forward in his saddle, grinning wickedly. “Better than Sagatin girls. Those ones smell like sheep and disappointment.”

Stepan, the most serious-looking of the six, shook his head as if embarrassed to share the same air with them. “You speak like fools.”

Venedikt, quieter until now, said calmly, “Fools live longer if they joke. Quiet men die thinking.”

That silenced them for a beat.

Dmitri found himself smiling despite fatigue. Their crude humor was like road dust—annoying, unavoidable, strangely comforting because it meant men were alive enough to be vulgar.

“You talk too much about women,” Dmitri said, keeping his voice dry. “A man riding five days should think of roads, not thighs.”

Yaromir winked. “Brother, roads are long. Thighs are… inspiration.”

Gleb laughed. “He’s a monk. He’s inspired by parchment.”

Bogdan called out, loud enough for all: “Tell us true, Dmitri. You ever break your vows for a red-haired girl?”

Dmitri’s smile faded just a fraction—not from shame, but from the memory of his mother’s loom, his father’s stern gaze, the monastery’s shelves. He answered honestly but without giving them his heart.

“I took vows for books,” he said. “Not for purity.”

Radomir cackled. “Ah! A monk of the old kind. The most dangerous kind.”

Stepan grunted. “Less talk. Eyes open.”

And like that, their laughter thinned and their attention widened again, scanning the road, the grass, the distant tree lines.

Dmitri rode between them with the sealed book pressed close, the cross cool against his chest, and the empire’s vastness stretching ahead.

Hoyam waited.

Alil Khan waited.

And whatever “forces in the west” Azim feared—Dmitri could not name them yet, but he could feel their shadow now, like a cloud moving across sunlit ground.

For two days they rode hard.

The road east of Magog was kinder—wide stretches of open land where a man could see trouble coming from a long distance, and where the wind carried smells honestly. The six Cossacks kept their formation without being told: two ahead, two behind, two drifting at the flanks like wolves of their own, while Dmitri remained in the protected center with the sealed book strapped tight under his cloak.

They stopped only when the horses needed it.

When they made camp, the difference between Dmitri and the Horde men showed itself immediately.

Dmitri would have been content with moss, a blanket, and a small fire—he had spent decades learning to need almost nothing. A tent, to him, felt like a palace.

But the Cossacks treated camp like a drill, as if they had been born and raised inside moving circles of wagons and watchfires. Their tent appeared in minutes—poles set, canvas tight, pegs driven deep. A cooking pot came out next, then utensils, then a bundle of dry wood that seemed to have been packed as carefully as a weapon. They moved with the calm speed of men who had done this a thousand times in rain, snow, and blood.

“Brother,” Bogdan called the first evening as he watched Dmitri spread his blanket on the moss, “you sleep like a bear.”

“I sleep like a monk,” Dmitri answered, tugging the blanket flat. “A bear would at least demand honey.”

Gleb laughed, squatting near the fire as he struck flint. “Our tent is your honey, then.”

“It’s your vanity,” Stepan said, already cutting thin strips of dried meat into the pot.

“Vanity is for priests,” Yaromir replied. “This is comfort. The Empire didn’t conquer half the world so we could sleep in wet grass.”

Dmitri’s mouth twitched. “You sound like a noble.”

“I sound like a man who hates waking up cold,” Yaromir shot back.

They ate together—salt meat softened in broth, bread warmed near the coals. Afterward, as twilight deepened, the Cossacks performed the ritual Dmitri had already seen glimpses of in Magog: discipline made visible.

They polished armor until it shone, even in firelight. They cleaned and sharpened blades with small stones, the soft rasping sound steady and almost soothing. Leather straps were checked, buckles tightened. One man worked a nick out of a spearhead as carefully as if he were repairing a saint’s icon.

Then, when the work was done, they sang.

Old Horde songs, the kind that didn’t sound like tavern music—low, rhythmic, built for marching and riding, for keeping men together in wind and fear. The melody rose and fell like the steppe itself. Even the joke-makers grew serious when the chorus came, voices joining with the instinct of a unit.

Dmitri sat close enough to warm his hands but far enough not to intrude. He listened and felt something inside him settle. It was hard to explain, but the songs carried the same feeling as his manuscripts: not “entertainment,” but memory.

As the last notes faded, Venedikt nodded toward Dmitri’s cross, which glinted faintly when the fire shifted.

“You wear it like a soldier,” Venedikt said quietly.

Dmitri touched the metal without thinking. “To me it’s not a charm,” he replied. “It’s… the empire’s mark. A reminder.”

Radomir snorted. “A reminder that priests like to argue.”

Dmitri glanced at him. “No. A reminder that a man was executed for trying to change the order of the world.”

The fire popped. Stepan’s eyes lifted, attentive now.

Bogdan, never able to resist a hook, said, “You mean Christ?”

“I mean Andronikos,” Dmitri answered, and watched their faces for reaction.

Yaromir scratched his beard. “I heard that name once in an old camp tale.”

“It’s in the chronicles,” Dmitri said. “If you read beyond the prayers.”

Gleb grinned. “We read only the parts that tell us who to stab.”

Venedikt’s gaze stayed steady. “Our elders say the book is history,” he said, choosing his words carefully, “and that later men made it into a superstition.”

Dmitri felt a small chill—not fear, but recognition.

“Yes,” he said. “That’s how I see it.”

Stepan leaned forward, elbows on knees, hands near the warmth. “My дед,” he said, voice low, “used to say the Horde is older than any of these city princes. That ‘Horde’ is just the old word for the army. Not foreigners. Not ‘invaders.’ Just the Empire’s сила—the force that kept roads safe.”

Dmitri looked at the six men around the fire and suddenly saw them differently: not merely escorts, but a continuation of something enormous.

“The books say the same,” Dmitri replied. “That the so-called ‘yoke’ wasn’t a foreign conquest at all, but an internal consolidation—unifying lands under khans-czars.”

Radomir spat into the fire, sparks flaring. “And yet every western trader you meet talks as if we were beasts from the steppe.”

“Because it suits their storytellers,” Stepan said.

Bogdan snorted. “Storytellers are more dangerous than archers.”

Venedikt nodded once. “They say we are runaway serfs.” He looked at Dmitri, almost challenging him. “As if we crawled out of holes.”

Dmitri answered with the certainty of a man who had copied the argument line by line in candlelight.

“The books deny it,” he said. “They say the Cossacks are the descendants of the regular Horde troops—living everywhere across the empire, not just at the borders.”

Yaromir’s grin returned. “Descendants of the army,” he said, pleased. “That sounds better than ‘robbers.’”

“It’s also a burden,” Stepan said, and his seriousness returned like a shadow. “If you are the Empire’s arm, you must act like an arm. No shaking. No betrayal.”

Gleb lifted his mug. “To no betrayal,” he said, then added with a wicked smile, “except stealing Bogdan’s blanket when he snores.”

Bogdan threw a crust of bread at him. “I don’t snore.”

“You sing like a dying bear,” Radomir said. “Of course you snore.”

Laughter rolled around the fire, and for a moment Dmitri felt the strange comfort of belonging—not to a monastery cell, but to a moving knot of men who lived by order and road.

When the laughter faded, Stepan stood.

He didn’t announce it. He simply rose, checked his blade, took a spear, and moved out to the edge of camp where the darkness began.

One stays up for a night watch—always.

No debate. No complaint. It was as natural to them as breathing.

Dmitri lay down on his moss and pulled his blanket tight. The tent behind him rustled as the others settled. The fire warmed his face. Beyond the light, Stepan's silhouette barely moved, a quiet line between the camp and whatever wandered the night.

Dmitri closed his eyes and thought of Azim's words again—*books are not safe*—and then of the Cossacks' songs, which carried the Empire in them the way a spine carries a body.

Maybe this is what keeps us whole, he thought. *Not gold. Not pillars. Not even khans.*

Order. Memory. Men who stand watch while others sleep.

And with that thought, he finally let sleep take him, while the Horde's discipline held the darkness at a respectful distance.

Stepan woke them before dawn with the quiet authority of a man who had already watched the dark and found it empty.

"Up," he said, nudging boots with the toe of his own. "Fire's dying. Horses need water. Road won't wait."

Bogdan groaned from inside the tent. "Road can go to hell. I was dreaming of a warm woman."

Yaromir's voice came muffled. "That wasn't a woman. That was your stew pot."

A thin smile tugged at Stepan's mouth, but he didn't indulge it. "Up."

They ate quickly—hard bread, salted meat, a ladle of yesterday's broth reheated over coals. The Cossacks moved in practiced rhythm: tent down, gear packed, traces checked, horses saddled. Dmitri simply folded his blanket and stood ready, watching their hands and marveling again at how camp, for them, was not a pause in life but its normal shape.

When they rode out, the morning was already warm, the sky the color of dull tin.

Not long into the ride, rain began.

At first it was a light tapping—drops on leather, on helmets, on the road's dust. Then it thickened into steady sheets. The road turned to mud under hoof, and a soft mist crawled in low across the ground, wrapping grass and stones alike. Yet the air stayed warm, almost oddly comforting, as if spring itself were trying to soothe them.

The Cossacks began to sing.

Not tavern songs—Horde songs, old ones. A chorus that rolled forward with their hooves, the melody cutting through mist like a banner you could hear. Dmitri felt something ancient in it, something that made the rain feel less like inconvenience and more like the Empire's breath.

They galloped for a few hours, pushing through slick ground with horseflesh and stubbornness.

Then shapes appeared ahead.

Seventeen men, distant at first—black cloaks against the gray rain, riding in a loose band. They seemed to slow, almost pausing, as if deciding. Then they angled toward Dmitri's party and continued approaching.

Radomir's head turned slightly. "Not merchants."

"No," Stepan said.

The riders' formation tightened.

The air felt different. Not colder—just sharper.

Radomir drew his sword with a clean whisper of steel. The sound made the others move at once: Yaromir's blade flashed out, Gleb's saber came free, Bogdan's weapon cleared its scabbard with a hungry metallic rasp. Venedikt lifted his shield; Stepan adjusted his grip on spear and rein as if those two things had always been one.

Dmitri felt fear bloom—quick, sour—and forced his hands not to shake as he drew his own sword. He kept the sealed book strapped tight beneath his cloak, but his palm found its edge instinctively, checking it was still there.

The black riders added speed.

Closer now, their faces became visible beneath wet hoods: dark-skinned men with hard eyes, braided hair on some, scars on others. Mercenaries, Dmitri thought—men from far roads who fought for coin, not banner.

One, a leader by posture alone, rode forward. His eyes were deep and dark, and he spat to the side as he shouted in an unknown dialect—harsh syllables, curse-words Dmitri didn't recognize, but the meaning was clear enough: *give, or die.*

Radomir yelled back in the empire tongue, voice like iron: "Turn around!"

The mercenary answered by whipping his horse faster.

And then a second man in a black cloak—lean, quick—caught sight of Dmitri's burden. His eyes locked onto the strap and the slight bulge beneath cloak. He didn't go for Radomir. He didn't go for Stepan.

He went for the book.

He surged toward Dmitri, blade raised.

In a split second the Cossacks sprang like a trap being triggered.

The road exploded into violence.

Steel clanged. Horses screamed. Mud flew up in dark spatters. The Cossacks slammed into the black cloaks, their discipline turning the smaller group of seven into something like a wall with blades. Stepan's spear punched forward and yanked back. Venedikt's shield caught a blow with a dull, ringing thud. Yaromir rode in close and hacked downward, dragging a man off his saddle by sheer force.

Dmitri fought as best as he could, breath coming hard, eyes wide, the world narrowed to the space a sword could reach. A black cloak swung at his head—Dmitri ducked and felt the edge hiss past his hood. He slashed back and struck leather, felt the blade bite, felt resistance, then a wet give.

Men fell into mud and were trampled. Limbs jerked, then lay wrong. Faces turned red and black with blood, rain washing it into streaks that looked like paint. The mercenaries fought fiercely—fast, brutal—but they did not fight together the way the Cossacks did. They fought as knives. The Cossacks fought as a fist.

Then Gleb slipped.

His horse skidded on a patch of slick mud. Gleb's boot lost the stirrup for a heartbeat, his weight shifted—just enough.

A black cloak rammed a sword through him.

It happened so quickly Dmitri almost didn't understand it until Gleb's mouth opened in a silent shock and his eyes went suddenly far away. The blade withdrew, and Gleb slid off the saddle into the mud as if he were only tired.

"GLEB!" Bogdan roared.

Something snapped in Bogdan's face. It wasn't grief. It was rage—holy, blind, vast.

Bogdan swung his blade in a great, scything arc and cut down two black cloaks in one motion—one's arm went, then the man's neck, and the second fell half a breath later, split and spilling into the rain-soaked road.

The battle raged on.

Dmitri took a blow near his shoulder—hot pain flaring through leather and cloth. He gasped, stumbled in the saddle, and in that moment his hand loosened.

The sealed book slipped.

It hit the grass beside the road with a soft, terrible thump.

Time slowed for Dmitri's mind.

No.

A mercenary lunged for it, reaching.

Dmitri's sword thrust upward from below, a desperate, ugly motion born of instinct rather than training. The point drove through the man's body, and the black cloak made a choking sound as blood filled his mouth. Dmitri shoved him aside and grabbed the book back with his left hand, yanking it close as if it were a child.

The mercenaries howled and pressed harder. Blades hammered against shields. Horses danced and kicked. The Cossacks began to show wear—breathing heavy, movements slower, arms trembling with repeated strikes.

Six more black cloaks fell in quick succession—Stepan's spear, Radomir's blade, Yaromir's furious chopping—but the enemy still came.

Then Bogdan fell.

A spear took him clean through the chest. He froze, eyes wide, as if surprised that rage could be stopped by wood and iron. Blood bubbled once at his lips. He tried to speak—maybe a curse, maybe a prayer—and then he toppled from his saddle, hitting the ground like a dropped sack.

“BOGDAN!” Yaromir shouted, and the sound tore from him like a wound.

Yaromir answered with violence. He swung three enemies down—one, two, three—each strike heavier than the last. When the third fell, Yaromir dropped to one knee in the mud, panting, shoulders sagging.

A blow came from behind.

Steel kissed skull.

Yaromir’s body jerked once and then collapsed, face-first, the rain already washing the blood away as if the world were ashamed.

Radomir fought like a man who had decided he would not live and did not care. He drove into the black cloaks again and again, roaring over the clash of metal.

“Protect the book!” he bellowed. “PROTECT THE BOOK!”

Dmitri fought with the book in one hand and sword in the other, staggering between duty and survival. His wounded shoulder throbbed, each breath tasting like iron. He hacked at a man’s wrist, felt fingers sever, watched the sword drop into mud. He kicked a rider’s knee and made him slide off his saddle. He kept the book pressed hard against his chest, soaked by rain, his fingers white with grip.

One by one the Cossacks went down—Venedikt, then Stepan, then Radomir, each falling under the weight of numbers and fatigue, their discipline finally overwhelmed by sheer brutality.

And suddenly—silence inside the noise.

Dmitri realized he was alone.

Bodies lay everywhere: black cloaks and Cossacks tangled together in the mud, horses limping or standing still with blank eyes, rain pattering on armor that no longer moved.

Only two mercenaries still stood.

They faced Dmitri across a few paces of churned earth and scattered weapons, breathing hard, cloaks dark with rain and blood.

Dmitri’s arms shook. His lungs burned. The book felt like stone in his left hand.

He dropped it on the grass with care—gently, like laying an icon down.

Then he took his sword with both hands.

The first mercenary limped forward—already wounded, but still dangerous. Dmitri stepped in, feinted, and struck. He cut the man’s leg, then drove the blade into his torso when the mercenary doubled. The black cloak collapsed with a grunt, hands clawing at the air, then went still.

The last mercenary screamed and rushed Dmitri like an animal.

They collided and went down hard, sliding in mud. Dmitri felt the man's weight slam into him. Hands like iron closed around his throat.

The mercenary strangled him.

Dmitri's vision sparkled at the edges. He clawed at the hands, but they were stronger. The world narrowed to pressure and panic and the taste of blood rising in his mouth.

Not here.

His fingers fumbled at his belt—searching, desperate.

The dagger.

He found it.

With the last breath he had, Dmitri yanked it free and slammed it upward into the mercenary's throat.

Once.

Twice.

The blade bit deep.

Blood sprayed in an arc, hot even through rain, splattering across Dmitri's face and beard. The mercenary gurgled, eyes wide in sudden disbelief, mouth working soundlessly as the life poured out of him.

The grip on Dmitri's throat loosened.

The man collapsed on top of him, heavy and limp, and for a moment Dmitri lay pinned under dead weight, gasping like a fish dragged onto shore.

Rain fell steadily.

Mud swallowed blood.

Somewhere nearby, the sealed book lay on grass, darkened by water but intact—silent, waiting, still demanding that Dmitri get up.

Dmitri shoved the body off with shaking arms and rolled onto his side, coughing, sucking air in ragged pulls. His throat burned. His shoulder burned. His whole body felt like it had been beaten with stones.

He stared at the sky through mist and rain, and a single thought hammered in his mind louder than any song:

Six guards. All gone.

Then he crawled—slowly, painfully—to the book, gathered it to his chest with trembling hands, and held it there as if he could shelter it with his ribs.

Around him lay the cost of Azim Khan's "trust."

And Dmitri, bloodied and panting, remained alive—alone on a muddy road—because the Empire's history had demanded it.

Dmitri sat in the saddle like a man waking from a nightmare into another.

Around him the muddy road was strewn with what the rain could not immediately erase—dark shapes in armor, horses standing riderless, broken spears half-sunk in churned earth. The chorus songs were gone. The jokes were gone. Only rain remained, falling with the same indifferent patience it had shown during the killing.

His throat burned where the mercenary's hands had squeezed. His shoulder wound throbbed with each heartbeat. His fingers shook as he pulled the sealed book tight beneath his cloak and cinched the strap again and again until it felt like part of his ribs.

He forced himself to look away from the bodies.

"I must get the book to its destination," he whispered. His voice came out rough. "I must not fail. The roads are dangerous."

He swallowed, tasted blood, and mounted.

The horse was spooked—nostrils flaring, muscles trembling—but it obeyed when Dmitri drove his heels in.

"Go!" he shouted, and then, louder, the kind of command that was half prayer and half violence: "GO!"

The horse surged into maximum gallop.

Mud flew from the hooves in heavy clots, spraying behind. Dmitri leaned low over the neck, one hand hard on the reins, the other pressed to the book under his cloak as if shielding it from rain and fate alike. He did not look back. Not once.

Rain washed his face clean in streaks—blood dissolving, grime thinning, water running down his beard and into his mouth. He blinked hard against it and kept riding, eyes fixed on the road's narrow promise.

Hours passed.

He rode until his legs went numb and his back felt like split wood. When the horse began to blow too hard, he slowed for a short stretch, then pushed again. He stopped only when he had to—only long enough to drink, to chew bread without tasting it, to tighten a strap, to let the horse swallow water and not collapse.

At night he slept a few hours at most—wrapped in his blanket, sword near, book hugged under his cloak so the seals would not soak through. He woke at every sound and every shift of wind, and when the sky paled he was moving again.

Days blurred into one another.

Road. Rain. Mud. Cold firelight. A few bites. A few swallows. Then saddle again.

Grief tried to rise—Gleb's surprised eyes, Bogdan's rage, Yaromir dropping in the mud—but Dmitri forced it down. There would be time for grief when the book was safe. If the book was never safe, grief could wait forever.

On the fifth day, the land changed.

The road firmed under hoof. The air took on the smell of city smoke and cooked food. Wires appeared again, stretched between poles like dark threads against the sky. Watch posts stood at intervals, better built than village palisades—signs of Chinese Tartaria's administrative hand.

Then Hoyam came into view.

It was not as vast as Magog, but it was proud—stone walls, bright-painted roofs, towers capped with metal finials, and a river running near it that carried barges heavy with goods. Lanterns and electric lights glimmered even in daylight under the gray sky, giving the city an eerie, orderly glow.

Dmitri's chest loosened slightly. Not relief—he had learned relief was a temptation—but the sense of arriving at the next necessary step.

Inside the gate, he rode slowly, asking the first official-looking passerby—a man in a clean coat with a badge at his belt.

"Where is Alil Khan's palace?" Dmitri asked.

The man looked him over—the monk robe, the leather armor, the grime, the hollow eyes—and then glanced at the sealed bundle under the cloak.

"North avenue," the man said, pointing with a sharp finger. "Past the canal bridges. White stone wall, red banners. You'll see it."

Dmitri nodded. "Thank you."

He rode on, following the avenue until the palace revealed itself: fortified, elegant, guarded. The banners here bore imperial marks in a slightly different style—same power, different hand.

At the outer gate, guards stepped forward immediately.

"Halt."

Dmitri dismounted without being asked and held his hands visible.

"Name."

"Brother Dmitri," he said. "Courier from Magog. Delivery for Alil Khan."

"Show."

He presented the sealed book without unwrapping it fully. The guard checked the cord, the seal mark, the binding. Another searched Dmitri—belt, boots, under cloak, the cross at his neck, the small Bible tucked inside his robe fold.

Questions followed, sharp and repetitive.

"How many came with you?"

Dmitri's mouth tightened. "I came with six guards."

“And now?”

“Now I am alone.”

The guards exchanged a look that was not sympathy—only calculation.

Finally, the outer commander nodded. “You will be escorted. Two of us.”

Two guards took position at Dmitri’s sides like moving walls and guided him through courtyards, corridors, and increasingly ornate inner spaces. Hoyam’s palace was rich, but less decadent than Azim’s—more disciplined, like a fortress that had learned to decorate without forgetting it was built to command.

They brought him to the throne room.

Dmitri stepped inside, the doors closing behind with a heavy final sound.

Alil Khan sat on his throne, not golden but lacquered and inlaid—dark wood and bright metal, a seat that looked less like luxury and more like authority carved into furniture. His face was leaner than Azim’s, his eyes sharper, his posture upright as if relaxation were a weakness. Advisors stood nearby in layered robes. Guards flanked the hall, motionless.

Dmitri walked forward, then fell to his knees and bowed low.

“Great Khan Alil,” he said, voice hoarse but clear. “I bring a sealed book from Khan Azim of Magog.”

A murmur moved among the advisors.

Alil’s gaze dropped to the bundle. “Bring it.”

A servant approached quickly and took the book from Dmitri’s hands, presenting it up to the Khan. Alil inspected the seal, then set it on a side table without opening it, as if its very existence was what mattered most.

Then Alil looked down at Dmitri again.

“And why do you arrive alone?”

Dmitri swallowed. His throat still hurt from the strangling; speaking felt like rubbing raw skin.

“On the road,” Dmitri said, “we were attacked by seventeen men in black cloaks. They came fast, as if they knew we carried this book. Six faithful and good soldiers died protecting it.”

He lowered his head further. “I survived. I carried the book. I did not fail.”

A hush settled in the hall.

Alil’s expression tightened—not grief, not anger at death.

Anger at information.

“Seventeen,” Alil repeated softly. His eyes flicked once to an advisor. “Men in black cloaks.”

“Yes, Great Khan.”

Alil leaned forward slightly. “Someone must have told them the book would be on its way,” he said, not quite to Dmitri, more to himself. His voice dropped, sharp as a blade. “How could they have known?”

A pause.

“A traitor,” Alil whispered, and the word seemed to chill the room more than any winter wind.

Dmitri waited for questions about the dead men, for a ritual of honor, for names to be recorded. But the Khan’s face showed no weight for the loss, as if six lives were nothing more than a handful of grain spilled on the road.

To him, they were flies—meat in the Empire’s million-man Horde.

Dmitri felt something twist in his chest. Not surprise—he had seen khans before—but fear, faint and dangerous.

He kept his head down.

A servant stepped forward with a coin pouch. It was pressed into Dmitri’s hands as if paying for a service rendered, as if blood were a simple transaction.

Dmitri bowed. “Thank you, Great Khan.”

Alil waved a hand, dismissing the moment. “You will go to Hoyam monastery library,” he said. “An elder monk there will have more work for you.”

Dmitri lifted his head slightly. “Yes, Great Khan.”

Alil’s eyes sharpened. “And you will not speak of this attack to anyone.”

The hall seemed to tighten around the command.

Dmitri’s mouth went dry. “As you command.”

Alil settled back, already moving on in his mind. “Go.”

The guards escorted Dmitri out as if he were no longer a person but a delivered message that had finished speaking.

Outside, the palace air felt colder despite the warm rain. Dmitri walked a while before he allowed himself to breathe properly.

His body finally remembered it was wounded. The shoulder ached deep now. Bruises on his ribs complained with each step. His hands were stained with dried blood again.

He went to a tavern first—not for pleasure, but because he could not enter a monastery library smelling like a battlefield.

Hoyam’s tavern was clean and bright, with electric lamps humming faintly overhead. He paid for a washing—hot water in a basin, soap scented with herbs. He scrubbed until the water turned gray, then scrubbed again until he felt human.

After, he ate properly.

Stew thick with meat and vegetables, bread soft enough to tear without struggle, and hot tea that soothed his ruined throat. He ate slowly, forcing himself to chew, forcing himself to swallow, forcing himself to be alive rather than only moving.

At last he took a room and lay down.

His mind tried to replay the fight—Gleb's fall, Bogdan's spear, Radomir's shout—but fatigue finally won. He slept with his face turned to the wall, the cross resting against his chest like a cold coin.

In the morning, he would go to the monastery library.

He would find the elder monk.

And he would learn what more the Empire demanded of a man who carried books through blood.

Morning in Hoyam came softly—no bells like Novgorod's iron voice, but a steadier pulse: distant footsteps in corridors, a kettle hiss, the low chant of early prayer leaking from somewhere behind stone.

Dmitri woke with his body reminding him of every debt.

His throat still felt bruised inside. His shoulder wound had crusted and pulled in the night. He sat up carefully, breathed through the stiffness, and for a moment simply listened to his own heartbeat, as if checking that it still belonged to him.

Downstairs in the guesthouse he ate in silence: porridge with a little salt, a chunk of bread, warm tea. Not indulgence—repair. When he finished, he returned to his room, unwrapped his bandage, and cleaned the wound properly. He boiled water, let it cool, rinsed away old blood and grime, then tied the cloth tight enough to hold but not so tight his arm went numb.

"Hold," he muttered to the flesh, as if it could obey orders. "Just hold."

He buckled on his belt, kept his cross beneath his robe as always, and set out toward the monastery library as the city fully woke around him.

Hoyam Monastery

The Hoyam monastery sat within a quieter quarter—stone walls, a modest gate, trees clipped into careful shapes. It wasn't as old-seeming as Novgorod's Holy Trinity, but it had that same look of institutions that outlast individual men: doors worn by hands, stones darkened by years of smoke and weather, and the faint smell of wax carried even outdoors by open windows.

At the gate, a young monk greeted him with a cautious bow.

"You are Brother Dmitri?" the monk asked.

Dmitri nodded. "From Magog."

The novice's eyes flicked briefly to Dmitri's wrapped shoulder and the tiredness behind his eyes. "Elder Inaus is expecting you," he said, then gestured inward. "This way."

They walked through a courtyard where two monks swept in steady strokes. Water ran in a narrow channel between stones. A few novices carried bundles of parchment as carefully as if they were carrying infants. The rhythm was familiar enough that Dmitri's shoulders eased.

The young monk led him to a side corridor and stopped at a door banded with iron.

"Inaus is inside," he whispered, as if the elder's name required softer air. He knocked once and opened the door.

The chamber beyond smelled of ink and dried herbs.

An older monk sat behind a wooden desk with a stack of ledgers beside him. His robe was plain, but his posture carried the quiet authority of a man whose power came from knowledge rather than rank. His beard was gray and trimmed short. His eyes were clear and appraising.

"You are Dmitri," the elder said, not asking.

"I am," Dmitri replied, bowing.

"I am Inaus," the elder said. "Sit."

Dmitri sat on the bench opposite. Inaus watched him for a moment, then spoke in the tone of a man sorting facts into order.

"Where did you come from?"

"Novgorod," Dmitri said. "But most recently, Magog. I delivered a book to Azim Khan and brought the sealed book here to Alil Khan. The escort…" He hesitated. "All six died on the road."

Inaus's expression did not change, but something in his gaze sharpened as if he were placing that information into a larger pattern.

"Yes," he said simply. "Word arrived. Alil is… displeased."

Dmitri almost laughed at the word *displeased*, thinking of mud and screams and the weight of dead men—but he kept his face still.

Inaus slid a finger along a note on his desk.

"I have an order to acquaint you with scrolls of old," he said. "You will read. You will remember. Some things must not remain only on paper."

Dmitri's stomach tightened. "Because paper burns."

Inaus's eyes lifted. "Because paper can be stolen."

He stood, took a key from a cord around his neck, and motioned Dmitri to follow.

The library of Hoyam monastery was smaller than Novgorod's great hall, but it was more ordered.

Here, the shelves were neat and labeled, arranged in sections that ran not only by subject but by time—chronological lines, dynastic groupings, regional archives. Every tome had a place that looked intended, not accidental. The air was cooler, drier, and carried the scent of old paper and treated leather.

Monks sat at wooden desks in long rows, heads bent, quills moving. The scratching of pens made a continuous whispering sound like rain on leaves. Small oil lamps burned in glass holders, their flames steady and protected from drafts.

As Dmitri entered, several scribes glanced up briefly—then returned to their work. No staring, no gossip. Discipline lived here too, but in quieter forms.

Inaus led Dmitri to a table in a back section, where a carved screen offered partial privacy. He sat down and placed a bundle of scrolls on the table with careful hands.

The bundle was heavy.

He untied the cords and began laying the scrolls out one by one, forming a growing pile.

Dmitri stared. “How many?”

“In the bundle?” Inaus asked mildly. “Enough.”

He pushed the first scroll toward Dmitri. “Read.”

Dmitri unrolled it carefully. The script was older, the letter forms slightly different from the hands he had copied in Novgorod. It took his eyes a moment to adjust.

It was a list.

Names. Reigns. Bloodlines. Titles. Places.

Old dynasties, laid out like a chain.

Dmitri read silently for a time, lips barely moving as he followed the lines.

Ikus Khan… then those before him, and those after—branches splitting, rejoining, repeating titles across generations. Some names carried annotations: *fled to the river cities*, *died in the northern campaign*, *married into the Magog line*.

He reached the end and took the next scroll.

This one was different.

Drawings—precise and technical. A tall tower with a pointed top. Metal rods. Coils. A box-like mechanism at the base, gears indicated with careful cross-sections. Lines marked as channels, wires, conduits. Notes around it described materials and measurements. Another drawing showed a dome with internal ribs and something like tuned plates along the inner curve, with annotations about tone and resonance.

Dmitri’s eyes widened despite himself.

Inaus watched him closely. “You recognize it.”

“I’ve seen parts of this,” Dmitri murmured. “In Novgorod… poles on towers, wires into churches. But this—this is instruction.”

Inaus nodded. “And instruction is more dangerous than history.”

Dmitri looked back down. The scroll described how to “pull the sky’s fire” and how to distribute it without burning the building. It spoke of grounding, of spacing between rods, of humidity and

“storm seasons.” A margin note, written in a different hand, warned: *Do not activate during mourning rites—tone becomes unstable.*

He took another scroll. And another.

A whole pile.

Some were genealogies of old khans and their lineages. Some were chronicles of early wars between Magog and rival tribes. Some were lists of city foundations, with the first stones placed under certain stars. And some—most unsettling—were legends written in a style halfway between chronicle and myth.

Dmitri read until his eyes blurred.

Finally Inaus placed a hand on the table, stopping him.

“Enough for now,” he said. “Listen.”

Dmitri looked up.

Inaus spoke quietly, but each word felt weighed.

“You must memorize as much as you can,” he said. “Specific monks are trusted with knowledge. They carry it. Not always in bags.”

“In the mind,” Dmitri said.

“In the mind,” Inaus agreed. “And in the voice. In hymns. In lists. In prayers that are not prayers.”

Dmitri felt the truth of it settle in his bones. *So this is why they want a monk. Not because monks are holy—because monks are trained to remember.*

Inaus’s gaze dropped briefly to Dmitri’s bandaged shoulder. “You are wounded,” he said. “So you will rest.”

Dmitri blinked. “Rest?”

“For a few weeks,” Inaus said. “You will stay here. We have a room. You will heal, and you will study these scrolls until the words enter your dreams.”

Dmitri hesitated. The road inside him protested—deadlines, orders, movement. But his body answered first with a deep ache.

“I understand,” he said.

Inaus leaned closer, voice lowering further. “And Dmitri—what you read here does not go to taverns. Does not go to the market. Does not go to men with curious eyes.”

Dmitri’s throat tightened. “I know.”

Inaus’s eyes held his. “Do you?”

Dmitri remembered the black cloaks. The way they turned directly toward him. The way they reached for the book as if drawn by a scent.

“Yes,” Dmitri said, and meant it. “I know.”

His room in the monastery was simple: bed, small table, a shelf, a wash basin. It felt almost like home—like Novgorod's cell, only with different shadows on the walls.

He brought his belongings in, hung his cloak to dry, set his sword near the bed out of habit, and placed the cross carefully beside his Bible.

Then the routine began.

Prayers at set times. Meals eaten quietly. Work in the library. Washing. Repairing bindings. Copying when needed. And always—study.

Dmitri spent his days with scrolls spread before him, memorizing dynasties until names became rhythm.

Ikus Khan, he read, and those before him—forefathers so old their stories blurred into legend. He read of the "First Builders," the people said to have come from inside the earth when days were dark—creatures of enormous strength who raised the earliest stone works not with cranes but with their own hands.

The scrolls described walls made of blocks so huge that later men could only marvel and call them impossible. Towers that pierced cloud line. Arches so wide a caravan could pass beneath without slowing. Domes so vast they seemed to hold the sky in place.

The text called the First Builders "giants."

Not as an insult. As a literal description.

Dmitri sat late one evening, candle low, rereading a passage with a frown.

They came up through the Warm Mouths, when the sun hid and the earth spoke. Their shoulders bore stones like loaves. They built without mortar, and the blocks fit like carved teeth…

He looked up from the scroll and found Inaus standing nearby, hands tucked into his sleeves, watching without a sound.

"Inaus," Dmitri said softly, "do you believe this?"

Inaus did not answer immediately. He walked to the table, glanced over the lines, then said, "Belief is for sermons. We are librarians."

"That isn't an answer," Dmitri said.

Inaus's mouth moved slightly—almost a smile.

"It is the only answer you will get," he replied. Then, after a pause: "There are older stones than our understanding. Whether the builders were giants, or whether later men simply grew smaller… the stones remain."

Dmitri swallowed and turned to another scroll.

It spoke of the first Siberian cities: Cingluy, Canglu, Akbaluch—names that sounded like wind and iron. It described their foundations near rivers that no longer ran in the same beds, their walls aligned to stars now shifted by time. It spoke of early wars between the peoples of Magog and the

priests of Gog—conflicts not only over land but over *names* and *records*, as if the first battles were already battles for history.

One passage chilled him:

The priests of Gog did not conquer with swords alone. They conquered with chronicles. They wrote men out of memory and called it victory.

Dmitri read that line twice, then sat back.

Chronicles as weapons, he thought. *So nothing has changed.*

Another scroll described Constantinopol—Czar-Grad—as the heart-city of an earlier age, where Andronikos-Christ's bloodline touched imperial power and sparked the schism that later men disguised with theology and myth. Dmitri cross-referenced names, dates, titles, as if assembling a mosaic whose picture had been deliberately smashed.

He began to understand why Inaus wanted him to memorize: if knowledge existed only in scrolls, it could be seized; if it existed in trained minds, it would travel, hide, and survive.

Days became weeks.

His shoulder healed slowly. His throat stopped burning. His strength returned. His mind, however, grew heavy with names and images—cities under earth, giant builders, star-aligned walls, dynasties branching like winter trees.

Sometimes, in the quiet hours, he found himself whispering lists to himself while walking the corridor:

"Cingluy. Canglu. Akbaluch…"

He would pause, realize what he was doing, and stop—because even walls could have ears.

And always, somewhere beneath the learning, the warning from Azim and Alil remained like a blade laid on a table:

There is a traitor somewhere.

In the monastery, Dmitri learned to live again like a monk.

But he was no longer the same monk who had left Novgorod.

Now he carried in his mind not only the Empire's history—but instructions, bloodlines, and myths that felt less like stories and more like keys.

And keys, he had learned, were exactly what the dark men on the road had been hunting.

Three months passed in Hoyam monastery like pages turning in a thick codex—slow in the body, fast in the mind.

Dmitri rose before dawn, ate with the brothers, prayed with them, then disappeared into the library as if pulled by a rope. From morning until evening he read and recited: lineages of khans and czars, foundations of first cities, and the quiet, terrifying logic of mechanisms that pulled fire from air and turned it into light.

He learned to memorize as the trusted monks did—by rhythm, by structure, by placing names into invisible “rooms” in his mind and walking through them at will. Ikus Khan and his forefathers. The branching bloodlines. The first builders and their impossible stones. Lists of cities—Cingluy, Canglu, Akbaluch—until the syllables became like prayer beads.

Some nights he stayed beyond the last bell, when most monks had gone to their cells.

He sat under candlelight until the wax ran low and the flame turned small and stubborn. The library became a cavern of shadows where ink scratched like insects. Only when the candle threatened to die did he allow himself rest, folding onto his bed with the day’s names still echoing behind his eyes.

In that time his shoulder healed fully. The bruise-yellow faded. The scar tightened, then settled into a dull line that only ached when rain came. He ate well every day—porridge, bread, stew, sometimes fish—and strength returned to his limbs. For the first time since leaving Novgorod, he felt something like home.

It was quiet. Ordered. Predictable.

Which is why the interruption came like a stone thrown into still water.

One afternoon, as Dmitri copied a small diagram into his memory—coil ratios, grounding lines, the angle of rods—Elder Inaus appeared at his table.

Inaus did not announce himself. He simply stood there until Dmitri sensed him and looked up.

“You have learned enough to be dangerous,” Inaus said.

Dmitri lowered his quill. “That is not comforting.”

“It is not meant to be.” Inaus held out a scroll wrapped in oiled cloth and tied with cord. The bundle was slender but felt heavy with importance.

Dmitri did not take it immediately. “What is this?”

“Technical drawings,” Inaus said. “To be taken to Constantinopol.”

The name landed in Dmitri’s chest like a bell strike.

“Constantinopol,” Dmitri repeated quietly.

“In the library there,” Inaus continued, “they are building a new device. An energy engine for a cathedral complex—one that will feed light across a district without the old instability. They need these drawings.”

Dmitri’s fingers finally closed around the bundle. The oilcloth was cool and slightly tacky to the touch.

Inaus leaned closer, voice dropping into the tone he used only when speaking of things that could kill.

“You will protect this with your life.”

Dmitri nodded once. “As with the book.”

Inaus’s gaze hardened. “The book cost seven men. Do not let paper cost more.”

Dmitri’s throat tightened. “I won’t.”

Inaus watched him for a long heartbeat, then said, “The monastery will pack you food for many weeks. You will take a strong horse, well rested. And you will not travel like a pilgrim.”

“I never traveled like a pilgrim,” Dmitri said, and the bitterness surprised him.

Inaus’s mouth twitched as if he had heard the bodies in Dmitri’s words and decided not to press.

“You will travel through the Lop desert,” he said, “then through Cogricamri. From there a road goes through the mountains to Karakithay. Across the plains you will reach the Turch lands, and from there you will turn toward Constantinopol.”

Dmitri pictured the map in his mind—desert, mountains, plains—each one a different kind of death.

Inaus added, almost casually, “In the Lop desert, ginn have been heard to be dwelling.”

Dmitri stared. “Ginn.”

Inaus’s eyes gleamed faintly with mischief. For the first time in months, Dmitri saw something almost playful in the elder’s face.

“It might be only a myth,” Inaus said, smiling thinly, “like giants.”

Then he turned and walked away, his robe whispering over the stone floor, leaving Dmitri holding the oiled scroll as if it were a live coal.

Dmitri looked down at the bundle and muttered to himself, “Myth or not, it bites the same if it’s real.”

A novice passing behind him pretended not to hear.

Preparations were swift.

Monks packed dried food into cloth and leather: hard bread, dried meat, salt, herbs for fever, a small pouch of crushed berries. They filled a waterskin and gave him two extra bladders folded flat, for desert use. They issued flint and steel, a small cooking pot, and a tightly wrapped packet of waxed cloth.

A stable brother led out the horse—tall, broad-chested, calm-eyed. The animal looked like it had never known hunger.

“Rested,” the stable brother said, patting its neck. “Strong. Not nervous.”

“Good,” Dmitri replied. “I’ve had enough nervousness to last two lifetimes.”

Brother looked him over—armor straps, sword belt, the old cross at his neck.

“You are healed,” he said.

“I am not healed,” Dmitri answered quietly. “I am merely not bleeding.”

Brother held his gaze, then gave a small nod of approval as if that were the correct answer.

“Go at noon,” he said. “Let the city’s eyes be busy. Leave when the streets are full.”

Dmitri bowed. “May the Empire stand.”

Brothers voice softened just a fraction. “And may you remain inside it.”

Dmitri mounted and rode out at noon.

Hoyam’s streets moved around him—market calls, carts, children, the hum of wires. No one paid special attention to a monk with a sword. In an empire this wide, the road made many strange men.

He passed beyond the gates, then beyond the fields, then into open land where the wind carried fewer human smells. He traveled half a day, riding steady and saving the horse’s strength.

By late afternoon the world began to change color.

The grass thinned. Soil turned pale. Stones became more frequent than plants. The horizon widened into something empty and hard.

Then he reached the edge.

Lop Desert

The Lop desert began not with a dramatic line, but with a gradual surrender of life. The last scrub bushes crouched low as if afraid of the sand. The air grew drier; it scraped his throat with every breath. The wind here didn’t smell like rain or pine—it smelled like heated stone and dust, like old bones.

The desert stretched ahead, flat and harsh, a pale sea with ripples carved by wind. In places the sand piled into low dunes, soft hills that shifted under the eye. In other places it hardened into packed crust that cracked in irregular patterns like broken pottery. Heat shimmered even though the sun was lowering, making distance uncertain.

Silence lived here differently than in forests.

In a forest, silence felt like something hiding.

In the desert, silence felt like something that had already won.

Dmitri reined in and stared across it.

His mouth was already dry.

He touched the oiled bundle beneath his cloak, then tightened the cloak to protect it from sand as much as possible. He checked his waterskins, making sure the ties were firm. He glanced back once—only once—toward the faint line of greener land behind him.

Then he faced forward again.

“Lop,” he muttered. “Ginn, if you’re real… keep your distance.”

He felt foolish speaking to emptiness, but after wolves and horned creatures and black-cloaked killers, he had learned that the world did not require his belief to contain horrors.

He nudged the horse forward.

Hooves sank slightly into the sand with a soft crunch. The first steps into the desert felt like stepping off the world's solid edge and onto something that could swallow you without leaving a mark.

Dmitri rode on, alone again—carrying not a history book this time, but the drawings of a new fire to be pulled from the sky, and the quiet certainty that someone, somewhere, would rather those lines never reach Constantinopol.

The Lop desert took Dmitri the way a sea takes a stone—covering him in its own language until even his thoughts sounded dry.

All day he rode through a wind that never fully stopped. It howled in long, moaning breaths, then calmed for a handful of heartbeats, then returned again as if angered by its own pause. In the distance, sand would lift in pale curtains—rising, swirling, then collapsing back to the ground as if the desert were repeatedly trying to stand up and failing.

Vegetation almost disappeared. A few stunted thorn bushes clung to life near scattered stones, but soon even those vanished. The world became a flat, shimmering emptiness—sand, salt crust, hard patches of baked earth fractured like old pottery.

The sun scorched his face, burned the bridge of his nose, and pressed heat through his cloak until the leather straps felt like they had been warmed in a forge. Dmitri rationed water at first, taking small sips, forcing his throat to accept dryness. He told himself he was being disciplined.

Then the weakness arrived.

It came quietly—first a slight swim of the horizon, then a heaviness in his arms as if the reins weighed twice what they should. His thoughts began to move sluggishly, as though trudging through mud.

No, he realized with sudden clarity. *Saving water is not discipline. It's stupidity.*

He drank more—longer pulls from the waterskin until his stomach felt cool and heavy. Within minutes, the fog in his vision thinned. The desert sharpened back into harsh clarity: the edge of a dune, the ripple patterns, the way the wind combed the surface like fingers.

He kept riding.

His shirt clung to his back with sweat. Salt dried on his lips. The horse's sides darkened with foam and dust. Dmitri spoke to it now and then—not prayer, not poetry, just steady murmurs to keep it moving.

"Hold," he said. "Hold a little longer."

Night arrived fast and cruel.

The temperature dropped as if the desert had been waiting all day to punish him for surviving the heat. The wind turned cutting. Dmitri shivered, teeth clicking once before he forced them still. He dared not build a fire—no wood, and even if there were, a flame in such emptiness felt like an invitation.

He wrapped his blanket tight and lay in the sand, using his saddle as a rough windbreak. The horse stood nearby, head low, shifting its hooves restlessly.

Dmitri closed his eyes, trying to sleep.

The desert did not feel like a place where anything lived, and yet he could not shake the sense that something watched.

He drifted into shallow sleep—

—and woke in the middle of the night to a sound that made his blood turn cold.

A screech.

The same wrong, ripping sound he had heard in Bars Col when the horned creature had stared at him and then fled into the trees.

Dmitri jolted upright, breath catching.

“This cannot be,” he whispered. His voice sounded small in the vast dark.

The horse snorted hard and stamped, ears flicking wildly.

Fear rose in Dmitri like a hand closing around his throat. In a forest you could run. In a town you could shout. Here—here there was nowhere to go but more sand.

He forced himself to breathe slowly. He reached for the reins and, with shaking fingers, tied the horse’s lead to his own wrist, as if anchoring himself to another living thing could keep the desert from swallowing him whole.

“Easy,” he murmured, more to himself than to the animal. “Easy. It’s wind. It’s only wind.”

But he knew wind didn’t scream like that.

He waited in the dark until the fear dulled into exhaustion again, and the sky began to lighten at the horizon.

Morning came, pale and merciless.

He rode on.

Within hours the sun was back to scorching. Heat climbed into his skull, making his thoughts swell and pulse. His mouth went dry again no matter how often he sipped. The horse’s breathing sounded strained.

Dmitri began to feel unwell.

It hit suddenly—nausea rising like a wave. He barely managed to stop before he lurched off the saddle and vomited into the sand, bitter water and yesterday’s food. He stood bent over, hands on knees, eyes watering, chest heaving.

When it passed, he sat down hard and stayed there for a long time, staring at the ground as if it might tell him which way to go.

An hour.

Maybe more.

Time in the desert did not behave like time anywhere else.

Finally he forced himself up, mounted, and continued—because stopping felt like dying slowly.

But something inside him had shifted. His sense of direction began to wobble.

He tried to orient by the sun, but the heat and his dizziness made even simple truths slippery.

“East is here,” he muttered, squinting. “West is there… wait… no…”

His mind stumbled over itself.

“East is this way… no…I mean… west… damn it… where the sun rises… where it sets…”

He swallowed, blinking hard, trying to remember the simple childhood certainty his father had once taught him.

“East,” he said at last, forcing the word to be solid. “East.”

He tied his blanket around his head like a hood, wrapping it to keep the sun off his neck and face. The cloth smelled like smoke, sweat, and road.

The world narrowed.

Sand. Sky. Horse breath. His own heartbeat.

No animals. No insects. No birds.

No people.

It felt like being trapped inside a sealed vessel, the air too thin, the silence too complete. Even the wind had grown quieter, as if the desert wanted to hear his thoughts.

Evening came, and with it a long, strange slowing—like the day was reluctant to end, stretching itself out.

Then Dmitri saw it.

There—far ahead, at the edge of visibility—something dark against the sand.

Two horns. Curved.

A hunched shape.

The goat-man.

It crouched in the distance the same way it had in Bars Col, as if it had all the time in the world. As if it had been waiting. As if it knew.

Dmitri’s stomach dropped.

He remembered the grin in the dim forest—the mouth opening, the long tongue panting, the sickly yellow eyes that stared like rot.

He whispered, almost pleading, “No.”

And then, in his mind, a colder thought formed:

He was smiling in the forest… like he knew I was coming here… how does it know?

Dmitri's lips moved in a prayer against darkness—words learned in childhood and reshaped by his own meaning.

Great Khan of the Empire, shield your servant.
Let order stand against the crawling void.
Let memory be stronger than fear.

The shape did not move away.

Instead, it seemed to multiply.

More figures rose out of the sand's shimmer—impossible silhouettes forming where there had been nothing. Some had tails that flicked like whips. Some had larger horns, branching or curling. Their bodies were black and hairy, humanoid and animal at once, and their eyes—too many eyes—caught the fading light with a sick, gleaming shine.

They came closer.

Not in a straight line, not like men. Some crawled low, hands and knees moving through sand as if it were water. Others ran in sudden, erratic bursts—darting far to the left, then far to the right, covering long distances with unnatural speed, only to return again toward him, circling, testing.

Dmitri sat rigid in the saddle, unable to command his limbs to flee. The horse trembled beneath him.

Now they were close enough that he could see details: cracked lips, tongues flicking, teeth too long in mouths that smiled too often.

They watched him.

Grinning.

One of them lifted its head and let out an immense screech—so loud Dmitri flinched, pain spiking in his ears. Every hair on his body rose. His hands tightened on the reins until his knuckles went white.

And in that moment, Inaus's voice returned with perfect clarity:

In the Lop desert, ginn have been heard to be dwelling… It might be only a myth… like giants.

Dmitri's mouth went dry again, but it wasn't from heat.

"Are these… jinn," he whispered.

Then the thought sharpened into terror:

These are demons. Real. They are real. Jinn are demons.

One creature crawled closer than the rest, moving with slow, deliberate certainty. Its head tilted, as if listening to Dmitri's heartbeat.

Then it spoke.

“Dmitri.”

The sound of his name in that voice was wrong—like someone had learned human speech by cutting it out of another man’s throat.

Dmitri’s blood froze.

The creature’s grin widened.

“You came to your torment, monk,” it said, each word wet and heavy. “This is your final resting place. Sand has many bones. Not all pass through here.”

Dmitri’s mind spun.

Hallucination, he told himself fiercely. *Sun sickness. Heat. Thirst. I’m seeing visions.*

He slapped his own face hard enough to sting, trying to break the spell.

“Wake,” he rasped. “Wake.”

He swayed, suddenly weak, and slid off the saddle into the sand. His legs didn’t want to hold him. He sat down heavily, breathing fast, eyes darting.

The creatures hissed.

They crawled around him in a tightening circle. Their movements were playful and cruel, like children tormenting a wounded animal.

Hands—clawed, dirty—reached in.

They yanked at his beard. Pulled his hair. Pinched his arms through cloth and punched his body strongly. One spat onto his cheek, the spit cold and viscous. Their voices rose in curses, rapid and harsh, in an ancient language that made his skin crawl even without understanding.

Dmitri tried to stand and failed. He tried to swing his sword and his arm felt like it belonged to someone else.

He heard himself whimper once—hated the sound—and forced it down.

His vision darkened at the edges.

The last thing he saw clearly was the goat-man’s grin, close now, teeth bared as if in celebration.

Then the desert tilted.

The sky became a pale smear.

And Dmitri’s mind—overheated, battered, terrified—finally shut its doors.

He passed out in the sand.

Dmitri clawed his way back to consciousness thinking, for a thin blessed moment, that it had all been a bad dream—heat, thirst, visions, and the desert’s madness.

Then pain struck.

Sharp, bright, unmistakable pain in his leg.

He opened his eyes and saw one of the demons gnawing at his left foot with sharp teeth, pulling skin. The creature's head jerked as it bit, as if tasting him, and Dmitri's whole body seized with a strangled groan.

He tried to kick, but his leg barely moved—only enough to make the pain flare hotter.

Another demon leaned close and blew air from its mouth that was foul smelling, and Dmitri started to feel like he is dying. Sensations hit him that he did not know even existed—vile, harsh, death. He felt death is near. Fear strangled him. His body was shaking. He groaned in agony, helpless and scared at his own helplessness.

Around him, the demons were moving fast, skittering and crawling in crooked loops, speaking in their ancient language—hissing syllables and wet clicks that made his teeth ache. Some were screeching, the sound slicing the dry air.

His horse was nowhere to be seen.

It had probably ran away in terror.

Dmitri tried to move, to reach for his sword, for anything—but his body was in total torment. Pain and death sensations went through his body in waves, rising and crashing again and again, like the desert itself had become an ocean and he was drowning in it.

One of the demons—taller than the rest, horns sweeping back—leaned down until its shadow swallowed Dmitri's face. Its mouth opened, and this time the sound that came out was harsh and guttural human speech.

"Tell me monk, wherest doest thou come from, inside earth or upside from air?"

Dmitri blinked, mind swimming. He does not understand what the demon wants.

"What do you mean?" Dmitri rasped.

The demon laughed—an ugly sound, like something tearing.

"You must tell me, fools die, wise walk away, desert knows, deep it moans."

Dmitri's thoughts stumbled over the words. His throat burned. The air stank. His foot throbbed where teeth had torn it. Still, something in him—stubborn, educated, trained by books—reached for meaning.

"How I come from earth?" he croaked, half-question, half-prayer.

Then, through the fog, memory surfaced: a treatise he had once read in the monastery, a small philosophical passage tucked between histories. It had said all bodies are made of earth and belong to it and go back into it.

His eyes widened slightly with the sudden click of the thought.

"YES! Earth I come from!"

The demon's grin vanished. It spat in his face and pulled his hair; some of it comes out and blood is running. Dmitri jerked and cried out, shock and pain mixing with humiliation.

“What?” he yelled, choking. “I told you the truth!”

The demon groans and screeches, leaning closer until Dmitri could smell its breath like rot and storm-damp fur.

“Alright mortal, the monk of cold walls, answer this then, earth was created and man was made, who rules the earth?”

Dmitri swallowed hard, fighting the nausea. The answer rose from his deepest loyalty, the loyalty that had carried him across roads and blood and khans’ halls.

“Earth is wide, the Khans are high, highest of all men, they rule the world, they conquer all.”

The demon rocked back as if savoring the words.

“They conquer all, they conquer all, what is left if they fall? Are the mighty Khans rulers of the world”.

It spat again in Dmitri’s face and screeched, and then it blew more air at him.

The foul wind hit Dmitri like poison.

Dmitri’s body was in total torment of death. He feels he is about to die now. Sweat is pouring from his body. He feels deep sickness, like a plague has hit him. His vision dimmed at the edges; his heart hammered like it wanted out of his ribs.

“No, no!” Dmitri screamed, voice cracking. “They are not the mightest, if the body dies it goes to earth, nothing remains, they are not greatest”.

Another demon crawls upon him, pressing weight onto his chest, its face inches from his.

“Who is greatest, who is ruler?”

Dmitri started to cry, tears cutting lines through the dirt and blood on his face.

“I dont know!... the... the Father...no..no...the Maker”.

The demons answered with torment—hands like claws yanking, pinching, striking. Ancient curses poured over him like boiling water. Somewhere close, one of them screeched again, long and triumphant, as if his confusion fed it.

“Fool, monks is fool as a beast!” one demon screeches.

Dmitri’s mind drifted, barely holding together. The treatise echoed again—*goes back to earth… body dies…* And with it came the simplest, most brutal equality: khan dies the same, soldier dies the same, monk dies the same.

In that fog, the thought suddenly cleared like a blade catching light.

EARTH…

His lips trembled as he forced the answer out, not as devotion but as realization.

“Earth is, the earth is RULER, the WORLD!”

The demons reacted instantly.

They screech and beat him as if the truth itself had offended them. One gnaws at his arm with sharp teeth, pain spiking white-hot. Dmitri convulsed and nearly blacked out again.

The taller demon leaned close, its voice thick with disgust and something like satisfaction.

“Foolish monk, speaks truth once... this time you rests”.

Then, as abruptly as they had come, the demons ran away. Some dug deep into sand and disappeared, vanishing beneath the desert as if the earth swallowed them back.

Dmitri lay there gasping, blood and spit drying on his face, arm throbbing, foot torn, stomach rolling with sickness. He tried to lift his head and could not. The sky above had turned the color of bruised metal.

He passes out.

Hours later—he could not have said how many—he came in and out of darkness without thought, only sensation: sand against skin, cold creeping into his bones, the taste of iron in his mouth.

Deep night settled.

At some point he fell asleep again, not from peace but because his body could no longer hold itself awake. It felt extremely unwell, as if the desert had poured its sickness into him and left it there to spread.

And in the blackness behind his closed eyes, the echo of that screech seemed to coil and wait—patient as sand, hungry as time.

Dmitri woke the next morning with sand in his beard and a crust of dried blood on his sleeve, feeling better—but shaking of fear, the kind that lives in the muscles long after the mind insists the danger has passed.

He sat up too fast and hissed. His foot burned where teeth had torn it. His arm ached where something had gnawed. He touched his throat and felt bruised tenderness, then looked around wildly.

Empty desert.

No crouching shapes. No horns.

No horse.

His stomach dropped.

The water was on the horse. All this food. The extra bladders. The saddlebag with salt and dried meat—gone with it.

He staggered to his feet, shielding his eyes, scanning the dunes as if a horse could hide behind a ripple.

“Horsie!” he shouted hoarsely, then corrected himself with angry embarrassment and yelled the animal’s proper call, whistling sharply the way stable brothers did. He whistled again. He called louder until his voice rasped.

Nothing.

Only wind and heat beginning to rise.

For a moment he stood frozen, panic trying to take his legs. Then he forced himself to breathe, forced his mind into order, and determined the right direction by the sun and by what he remembered of yesterday's broken, dizzy orientation.

He tucked the scroll into the sleeve of his monk's robe, tight against his forearm where it would be shaded and protected from sand. He checked his sword at his belt—still there, thank God—and tightened it.

Then he began walking.

Hours passed.

The desert gave him no landmarks, only subtle changes in sand texture, occasional crusted patches, and far mirages that pretended to be water until they dissolved when he stared too long. Heat rose and pressed down again, as if the sun were a hand.

His mouth dried quickly.

As he walked, his mind turned in circles.

Why the hell are the demons tormenting him, he thought. He has done nothing wrong. It does not make sense. He is a good and pious man. He has served the empire.

Then another thought, more bitter and resigned, came.

This has nothing to do with him. There are places where demons exist and they are evil and they torment people.

He clutched the sword on his belt as if it could cut ideas out of the air.

He kept walking.

His foot hurt. His shoulder scar pulled. His throat felt raw every time he swallowed. He tried to save saliva by breathing through his nose, but the air was so dry it seemed to steal moisture just by touching him.

Soon he felt truly thirsty.

Not just dry mouth—thirst that moved into the bones, making the skull feel tight and the tongue feel like leather. He kept walking anyway, because sitting down felt like it would become lying down, and lying down felt like never rising again.

Seven hours passed.

Then, as if the desert itself had decided to return what it had taken, the horse appeared.

It came suddenly from the sand's shimmer, galloping—dust and grains spraying from its hooves. It looked wild-eyed, mane blown back, but unmistakably alive. It slowed as it recognized Dmitri, then came closer with a snort as if offended that its master had wandered off.

Dmitri laughed—half sob, half relief.

“You bloody beast,” he said with a trembling smile, voice cracking. “You returned.”

He grabbed the reins and pressed his forehead briefly against the horse’s neck, feeling the warmth and the living pulse there.

Water first.

He pulled the waterskin from the saddle and drank greedily—long pulls, swallowing too fast, choking once, then drinking again. Cold, clean, life. When he could breathe again, he gave water to the horse, letting it drink until its sides stopped heaving so hard.

Strength returned into Dmitri’s body in waves, as if the water had turned gears inside him.

He mounted, adjusted the scroll inside his sleeve, tightened the cloak to shield it, and urged the horse forward.

They galloped.

The desert blurred beneath them. Time began moving again like time, not like an endless vacuum. Dmitri rode hard through the heat, stopping only to water the horse and drink himself, no longer pretending he could out-discipline thirst.

After whole days riding, the Lop finally loosened its grip.

The sand thinned. Hard ground returned. Low scrub appeared, then scattered stones, then the blessed sight of a real road—packed earth and gravel, marked by posts that told him he had not been walking in circles.

Relief hit him so violently he nearly doubled over in the saddle.

“I made it,” he whispered. “I made it out.”

A signpost—weathered but readable—pointed toward Cogricamri.

He followed the road, and within a couple of hours the city appeared—low walls, towers, smoke, movement. Human noise. Human order.

He rode straight to a tavern and nearly fell in the door.

The tavern keeper blinked as Dmitri stumbled to a table—dust-caked, sunburnt, eyes too bright with exhaustion.

“Water,” Dmitri rasped. “Two large mugs. Clean. Cold.”

The keeper snapped his fingers at a girl. “Now.”

When the water came, Dmitri drank one mug down like a man pulling himself out of a river. He drank the second more slowly, savoring it, feeling life settle back into him. Then he ordered food and ate without shame—stew, bread, something salted, something greasy. His body demanded it like a tax.

Only after food did he remember the scroll and touch his sleeve to make sure it was still there.

It was.

He sat back, closing his eyes for a moment.

The demons… the jinn… whatever they were, he thought. *I'm alive. The paper is alive. That's what matters.*

He rented a room and climbed upstairs, boots dragging. In the room he unwrapped his foot, cleaned it as best he could, then tied it again. He checked the scroll's oilcloth—still intact, still protected. Then he lay down on the bed and fell asleep with gratitude so strong it felt like pain.

Thankful and glad he had made it out of the desert alive.

The next day he rode on toward Karakithay.

The road rose into harder terrain—hills, then mountain shoulders, the air cooling at night and warming sharply by day. He kept a steady pace, caring for the horse, guarding the scroll, speaking little to strangers.

In five days he reached the plains beyond the mountains.

The openness felt like mercy after sand and rock. The sky looked wider. The wind smelled of grass instead of dust. He slept better.

And in one more day he crossed into the Turch lands.

The change showed itself in accents and dress, in market goods, in the way banners were stitched—but the imperial order still ran through it all like a hidden spine: the same roads, the same coin marks, the same watch posts with men who looked at papers and seals with practiced eyes.

Dmitri rode on, alone but moving again, the scroll safe in his sleeve.

Sometimes, when the wind shifted just right, he thought he heard a distant echo—something like a screech carried from far behind.

But when he looked back, there was only horizon.

Only road.

Only the Empire stretching forward, demanding that he keep going.

The next two weeks Dmitri rode from village to village until he arrived at the Hyrcanum Sea.

As he neared the coast, the world thickened with life. Villages grew more dense—one every twenty kilometers now—whitewashed houses clustered around small piers, nets drying on poles, olive groves and low stone walls, herds of goats moving like gray foam over hills. Sea wind carried salt and fish and smoke, and at night he could hear waves like a long breath in the dark.

Here, for the first time in a long time, Dmitri moved without a deadline biting his heels.

No date given. No Khan's timetable. Only the instruction: *deliver to Constantinopol.*

So he allowed himself to rest.

He stayed in inns more often, ate warm food, drank water without counting each swallow, and in the evenings sat by lamps and read his Bible—not as prayer, but as history. He argued with himself in whispers, turning lines over in his mind the way he used to turn parchment pages: *Who wrote this? Who copied it? What did they hide? What did they repeat?*

Sometimes he spoke to locals, and the conversations felt like stepping into a new cloth pattern.

The people here were olive-skinned, a look he wasn't used to in Novgorod. Many wore turbans and carried curved swords, but they moved under imperial order like everyone else—coins stamped with the double-headed eagle, road patrols asking the same questions, merchants using the same measures. Their speech was heavily Turkic, yet most understood Russian well enough to bargain, joke, and complain.

All Tartaria lands.

The empire vast as the world.

One innkeeper, a broad man with oiled hair and a quick smile, poured Dmitri tea and asked in accented Russian, "You come from far north?"

"Novgorod," Dmitri said.

The man whistled softly. "Cold land. Bells. Long winter."

"And you?" Dmitri asked.

"Here," the innkeeper said, sweeping his hand toward the sea as if he owned it. "Hyrcanum wind. Fish. Salt. The empire is wide, brother. Very wide."

Dmitri nodded. "Wider than people remember."

The man laughed. "People remember what their belly allows."

Dmitri almost smiled at that—then caught himself thinking again of how memory was being hunted.

In those coastal villages, gossip traveled faster than riders.

He heard, in bits and hints, the same whisper he'd heard before, only now it came from mouths that had never seen Novgorod snow.

They spoke of the western lands.

They spoke of colonizing the "Promised Land," the regions some now called Europa—new cities founded there, sparse but growing, built with old knowledge carried by settlers. In his head Dmitri linked it to what he'd read: the Bible's conquest story echoing real imperial expansions, later editors hiding the trail. He remembered how the old books argued that the "Promised Land" of the chronicles was not a tiny patch of desert, but broad southern territories—Balkans and southern Europe—conquered in the great campaigns .

Now he was hearing the human version of that argument, spoken over tea and fish stew.

A fisherman in one village spat into the sand and muttered, "West thinks it can breathe without east."

An older trader answered with a shrug. "West is full of young sons. They want their own table."

"Independence," the fisherman said like it was a bad taste. "Heritage. New treatises. New lords."

New sons of the empire in the west.

Dmitri listened, said little, and stored it away the way he stored dynasties—because rumors, too, were a kind of chronicle.

He rode on through Sumachi village and into the lands of Arme, where hills rose sharper and the road climbed in steady stretches. Inns became more fortified. Patrols wore slightly different styles of armor. But the backbone of empire remained: road markers, taxation posts, stamped seals, and the quiet assumption that the world belonged to one order.

Constantinopol was now a week away on full gallop.

Dmitri did not gallop the whole week. He rested between. He slept nights at inns, letting his foot finish healing, letting his body rebuild itself after desert sickness. He reread passages in his Bible and compared them with the knowledge Inaus had put into his head like hidden fire.

And the closer he came, the more his thoughts sharpened into awe and dread.

Czar-Grad, he thought. *New Rome. The city that wore the name of empire like a crown.*

He remembered what the books insisted: that “Rome” and “Jerusalem” were titles that moved with power, and that Constantinopol—the second and greatest “New Rome”—was the central stage of many stories later scattered into other geographies . He remembered the claim that Andronikos—Christ in the imperial chronicle—had lived and been executed here, on the heights above the Bosphorus . He remembered the bold identification: Hagia Sophia as the Temple of Solomon—Solomon as Suleiman—empire memory disguised as “ancient scripture” .

And now he was going to see it with his own eyes.

He rode one more week.

Then, one morning, the horizon changed.

Not dunes, not hills—walls.

The mighty Constantinopol rose from the earth like a geometry made of stone and will: layered fortifications, towers set at intervals, walls running in long, confident lines that seemed too vast to belong to mere men. Ships crowded the water beyond—masts like a forest, sails furled, hulls rocking gently in harbor swell. The air smelled of salt, tar, fish, incense, and smoke, all at once.

Dmitri reined in on a rise and stared.

His throat tightened without permission.

So this was it.

The town where Christ had ruled and been crucified—Andronikos in the chronicles. The town where Solomon’s temple lay in Hagia Sophia. The town of ancient tales and peoples of old. The center of Christianity—not a religion in his mind, but a memory engine for the empire.

As he rode closer, the city’s details unfurled.

Along the outer walls ran patrols in polished armor. Gates were immense—wood banded with iron, set beneath stone arches carved with eagles and saints and imperial insignia. The road leading in

was wide and paved, built for processions and armies. Water channels ran beside it, carrying clean flow into the city like veins.

Inside, Constantinopol was a world.

Crowds moved in waves—merchants and sailors, soldiers and monks, nobles in embroidered robes, craftsmen with tools hanging from belts, foreign envoys with guarded faces. Languages braided together: Russian-Turkic imperial speech, Greek tones, Arabic cadences, Italian-like trader talk—yet the city held them all as if it were the center knot in a net.

He saw markets that made Novgorod's look modest: stalls of spices and bright cloth, metalwork so fine it looked like lace, glass vessels that caught the sun and turned it into colored fire. He saw water brought by aqueducts and distributed into fountains and baths. He saw bridges over canals, and stone roads that rang beneath hooves like bells.

And above it all—Hagia Sophia.

It did not merely stand. It dominated.

A vast dome rose over layered arches, the building's mass so enormous Dmitri felt it press on his chest as if the city had a second sky made of stone. Sunlight slid across its surfaces; gold glinted in mosaics and trim. Around it were courtyards, lesser chapels, administrative halls, and lines of pilgrims and officials moving as if drawn by gravity.

Solomon's Temple, Dmitri thought, remembering the claim he had read with skepticism and then with growing certainty .

He saw towers with metal poles and wire lines, like in Magog—only here, the network was denser, more deliberate. Lamps hung under arches and along main avenues, glass globes that could be lit at night without open flame. Mechanisms—gear housings, transformer boxes—sat on rooftops and inside fenced stations guarded by soldiers. The city hummed with controlled "sky-fire."

Processions moved through broad squares: priests with censers, officials with banners, soldiers with spearpoints shining. Statues stood on plinths—khans and emperors, saints and allegorical figures—each carved to declare permanence. Columns rose in plazas, carved with victories and names, like history made into architecture.

Dmitri rode slowly now, overwhelmed.

He had spent years in candlelit libraries copying words about this city. He had memorized dynasties and myths and mechanisms. He had carried paper across blood and desert.

And yet no ink had ever prepared him for the reality:

Constantinopol wasn't just a city.

It was the empire's memory made stone.

He touched the scroll hidden in his sleeve, feeling the oiled cloth, the stiff roll of diagrams within.

"Hold," he whispered—whether to himself, the scroll, or the city, he wasn't sure.

Then he rode forward into the heart of Czar-Grad, toward the libraries that guarded the empire's deepest designs, and toward whatever forces—western or demonic—had already begun hunting the knowledge he carried.

Dmitri rode into a tavern first, because even Constantinopol could not be entered on an empty stomach.

The place was loud and warm, filled with sailors and clerks, merchants with ink-stained fingers, soldiers with damp cloaks steaming near a hearth. He ordered a simple meal that tasted like the city itself—bread still warm, stewed meat with herbs he couldn't name, olives and sharp pickled vegetables, and cold water that felt like a luxury after Lop.

He ate slowly, letting the weight of the journey finally settle into his bones. Then he wiped his hands, tightened his belt, checked the scroll hidden in his sleeve, and went out into the streets again.

The Constantinopol city library was easier to find than he expected. Everyone, it seemed, knew where records lived—because in this city, records were power.

He reached a heavy door guarded by two men in fitted armor. After a brief exchange—name, origin, purpose—he was allowed inside. The air changed immediately: cooler, drier, scented with old leather and wax. Quiet pressed in like a rule.

A younger monk led him through corridors lined with shelves and locked cabinets until they reached a chamber where an elderly monk sat at a writing desk, surrounded by piles of folded documents and inkpots.

The man looked up with the calm of someone who had seen thousands of couriers and was unimpressed by travel dust.

"You seek the head monk of the library," he said, not asking.

"I do," Dmitri answered. "Brother Dmitri. From Hoyam monastery—by order of Elder Inaus."

At the name *Inaus*, the old monk's eyes narrowed slightly. Not suspicion—recognition.

Dmitri drew out the oiled bundle, held it with both hands, and bowed.

"Technical drawings," he said. "For the device to be built here. Delivered from Hoyam, by the road through Lop and Cogricamri."

The monk accepted the scroll with careful fingers and examined the seal and the cord before he even considered opening it.

"You are alone," he noted.

Dmitri's mouth tightened. "I traveled alone for most of it."

The monk's gaze flicked to Dmitri's healed scars and bandages, to the sword at his belt. He said nothing, only gave a small nod as if he had read the rest from Dmitri's posture.

"You have done what you were sent to do," the monk said. Then he placed the scroll into a wooden case, latched it, and slid it behind him onto a shelf that looked like it held other things that could ignite wars without ever being set on fire.

He studied Dmitri a moment longer, then his voice softened into something almost kind.

“You may stay at the nearby monastery,” he said. “Free food and a room. You look like you’ve been scraped across half the world.”

Dmitri felt relief bloom so suddenly it made him lightheaded. “I accept,” he said simply, because refusing generosity in a city like this felt like refusing shelter during a storm.

The monk nodded once and motioned to the younger brother. “Take him.”

Dmitri rode to the monastery, was given a small cell and a basin, and set some of his gear in the room: extra cloth, his cooking things, the battered blanket that had been his real home. He sat on the edge of the bed and exhaled, long and slow.

But rest, in Constantinopol, did not mean sleep.

Not yet.

He could not wait to see the Bosphorus.

He could not wait to see Mount Beykoz—the place where the chronicle said the crucifixion had taken place in I.152.

So he left most of his gear, kept his sword out of habit, and went.

He reached the slope by late afternoon.

The Bosphorus wind was different from any wind he’d known—wet, sharp, salted, carrying the smell of ships and distant fires. The water below moved with a steady authority, as if it remembered every oar and hull that had ever crossed it.

Mount Beykoz itself was not a dramatic peak so much as a stern rise above the water—stone and brush and paths worn by feet.

At the top, there was a small garden with an iron fence.

A modest place, considering the stories.

Inside the fence, carefully tended, was a patch of earth with stones arranged in reverent order. People came by in small clusters: some bowed, some pressed fingers to lips, some whispered prayers. A woman left flowers. An old man touched the fence and wept without sound. A pair of monks chanted softly.

Dmitri stood aside and simply looked.

To him it was not a magical site.

It was history.

A resting place of a king.

Andronikos, he thought. *A ruler—perhaps too bold, perhaps too alone—crushed by forces that did not forgive change.*

He wandered in his mind through the tales that formed later.

Risen body.

How can it be if the man died? he asked himself, staring at the quiet soil. *Was he just a man… or was he something more?*

His thoughts turned hard and bitter.

And why worship a human body? he wondered. *The man died in agony. His teeth pulled out. Spat at. Stabbed with swords. Then hung between two posts.*

Two posts.

He frowned, as if the shape itself mattered—because it did.

Then why the cross if it was two posts?

He remembered the depictions he'd seen in manuscripts, icons, foreign prints: Egyptians with the tau cross, some with a T-cross, some with a full cross. Variations layered like sediment.

I would prefer two posts altogether, he decided grimly, *as it's closer to truth.*

His eyes returned to the fence and the small garden.

Why is a suffering man worshipped? he thought. *He was a good king. That should be enough.*

He imagined the Komnenos line stretching back—an imperial family woven into Byzantion's power, tangled in alliances and betrayals, rulers and claimants, each generation inheriting not only a throne but enemies born before them. In his mind, Andronikos was not a floating saint but a man of that blood—hard-edged, brilliant, doomed in the way certain rulers are doomed when they try to tighten a slipping empire with bare hands.

Respect him as king, Dmitri thought, *remember him as king… but worship his corpse?*

He watched a young man kneel and press his forehead to the ground.

Dmitri felt no anger at the man—only sorrow at how memory turned into ritual when understanding faded.

When he finally left Beykoz, he did so quietly, like a man leaving a graveyard where he had no dead of his own but still felt the weight of the earth.

He rode back down into the city center.

And then he went to the Temple.

Hagia Sophia—Solomon's temple in the old claim—stood like a second sky over Constantinopol. Even after days in the city, it still looked impossible, as if built by a civilization that did not fear weight.

At the entrance, guards and attendants enforced the custom: shoes removed.

Dmitri unlaced his boots and set them aside, stepping onto the cool stone barefoot. The sensation was immediate—smoothness, chill, a feeling of stepping into something not meant for ordinary feet.

Inside, he stopped.

The arches were immense. The dome floated above as if held up by air rather than stone. Gold and colored surfaces caught light and scattered it softly so that the hall seemed lit from within. Columns rose like a forest of carved trunks. The place smelled of incense, wax, and old stone warmed by centuries of bodies.

Dmitri's heart thudded.

He walked slowly, head tilted back, mouth slightly open in awe he couldn't control.

How did they make this? he thought. *Not only build it—make it feel like the world is smaller than the ceiling.*

And then another thought, darker, slid in—because the desert had carved a new channel in his mind.

He remembered the tale: Solomon telling demons to build the temple.

He used to treat it as metaphor, as scribal flourish, as the way later men explained engineering they no longer understood.

But now—

Now he knew demons were real.

He had smelled their foul breath. Felt their hands. Heard his own name spoken in a voice that should not have known it.

Standing under the dome, Dmitri found himself whispering without meaning to:

Was it similar demons who built the temple?

His eyes traced the lines of stone and gold.

How did he get them to do that?

A chill ran through him that had nothing to do with the cool floor under his feet.

Demons, he thought, are ancient and wise. They know things. They crave knowledge and they have plenty of it. They are older than human race.

He looked up at the dome again, and for the first time his awe carried a new edge—unease, suspicion, a sense that beauty could be made by hands that did not love what they built.

If they built it, he thought, *then what did they demand in return?*

He stood very still among the moving crowd—pilgrims, officials, monks—feeling the city's holy center as both wonder and question. A place where history, power, and something unseen overlapped.

And Dmitri, Keeper and traveler, realized that delivering drawings was the smallest part of what had brought him here.

Constantinopol was not only stone and domes.

It was a knot of truths—some human, some imperial, and some that hissed from the edges of the world and called him by name.

The next morning Dmitri went straight back to the city library.

He asked not for theology this time, but for maps—old plans of Czar-Grad, portolan charts of the Bosphorus, lists of gates and walls, and any manuscripts that described how the city had been built "in the first ages."

A young scribe with ink-stained fingertips led him to a cabinet of rolled parchments.

"Old city plans," the monk said. "Copies of copies. Some are labeled in Turkic hands. Some in old Russian."

Dmitri's pulse quickened. "Bring them."

They spread the first map on a long table and weighted its corners with smooth stones. The parchment smelled of dust and oil.

It was an odd thing—biblical names written over real streets, like two cities laid one atop the other. Dmitri had seen this method before in Hoyam: the habit of scribes to rename places in sacred language, then later men mistaking the sacred language for faraway geography.

He read the labels slowly, almost whispering them.

"The Wall of Jerusalem."

Dmitri's eyes went immediately to the thick line drawn like a clenched jaw around the city's land side.

The Theodosian Walls, he thought—those massive triple defenses he had glimpsed on the ride in. In the historical books, "Jerusalem's wall" is simply the wall of New Rome on the Bosphorus, the fortification of Czar-Grad itself.

A second label sat near the great church precinct:

"The Palace of Solomon."
And beside it, scribbled in the margin by some later hand: "*Temple.*"

Dmitri felt a cold certainty.

Hagia Sophia.

He remembered the line he had read and reread: that the "Temple of Solomon" described in the Bible "stands until this day" as Hagia Sophia in Constantinopol. Not metaphor—identification.

He traced the drawn outline with his finger, then stopped himself, as if touching it too firmly might wake someone watching.

"Do you see?" he muttered to himself. "They wrote it in plain ink, and later men called it mystery."

The scribe glanced up, uncertain whether to speak.

Dmitri pointed to another mark: a heavy gate symbol on the western line.

"The City Gate."
"The Ascent at the Very Firm Corner."

The map placed it near a “firm corner” of the wall—the steep ascent where stone rose like a cliff. Dmitri pictured the great gates and towers he’d passed under.

Golden Gate, he thought. *The ceremonial mouth of the land wall.*

Some labels were familiar in their truth, others familiar in their deceit.

“Antonia Fortress.”
On this plan it sat by the great gate complex, drawn as a strong enclosure. Dmitri frowned.

Antonia.… A fortress name, yes—but in his mind it was not a separate Judean structure. It was simply another title pasted on the same defensive mass of Czar-Grad, as so many “biblical” names were pasted onto real stone.

He moved on.

A blue-tinted area on the map was marked:

“The Open Pool Called the High One.”

An open “high pool.” Dmitri remembered the city’s reservoirs—huge open cisterns that held water like captured sky. Those existed in I.350, still serving the city’s veins.

And near a long aqueduct line, faintly drawn:

“The Pool…” / “The Street of Bethacharam.”

The labels clustered around waterworks. Dmitri thought of the great aqueducts feeding Constantinopol—water made into governance.

He turned to another parchment—newer ink, more detailed, and several labels that felt… wrong for this time.

“The Queen’s House.”
“The Hall of Nations.”
“The Inner Hall.”

These sounded like palace interior terms. Dmitri had heard such phrases spoken of later courts—of “inner halls” and ambassador chambers. But in I.350, the palace geography was different; the old imperial residences existed, yet the exact naming smelled like an overlay from a later re-arrangement of power.

He tapped the margin and murmured, “These are later hands.”

The scribe leaned in. “Later than what?”

“Later than *now,*” Dmitri said, and saw the boy’s confusion deepen.

He took the next map to safer ground—structures he could place in his own eyes.

A jagged rectangular precinct by the shore:

“The Palace of David.”

Dmitri’s mind supplied the image from rumors and sketches: the old sea palaces—Boukoleon and the Great Palace zones—imperial seats in earlier centuries, now partly broken, partly repurposed,

still heavy with memory. The scribes had called it “David,” because in these texts David was an imperial archetype: the warrior-king, the lawful ruler. Names sliding over stone like masks.

Another label:

“The Ox Market.”

Dmitri smiled grimly. The Ox Market—the place of cattle, of meat, of the city’s stomach. Even the sacred maps could not disguise hunger.

Then he found a tower mark across the water line:

“The Tower.”

Here Dmitri paused. Across the Golden Horn, in the Galata quarter, a new stone tower had been raised not long ago—fresh enough that old men still argued about its purpose.

Galata’s tower, he thought. *New, but already pretending to be ancient.*

He flipped through more.

“The Fish Gate.”
Along the sea wall line—fish markets, sea gates, the living mouth of trade.

“The Dung Gate.”
A crude name—waste gate. Even holy cities had sewers.

He kept sorting—mentally and physically—until the table looked like a battlefield of parchment.

What Dmitri judged as truly “old” by I.350

He did not write it down—writing was dangerous—but he arranged the maps into piles in his mind: Ancient-and-still-standing: the great land walls, the sea walls, the major gates, the great church-temple (Hagia Sophia), major aqueduct/reservoir works, old palace precincts by shore, and a handful of great monasteries. Old-but-layered: districts where later scribes had pasted “biblical” names over ordinary streets and stairways, confusing the map on purpose or through tradition. Clearly later overlays: palace interior labels and “Solomon” naming conventions that sounded like future court language—*as if another ruler would someday deliberately re-stamp the city with his own titles.*

Dmitri sat back, eyes stinging from concentration.

So this is how the lie is made, he thought. *Not by inventing stone—by renaming it until the stone forgets its own name.*

His fingers drifted to his cross at his neck.

Not a charm. A reminder.

He looked again at “Temple of Solomon” written near Hagia Sophia and felt the desert’s memory crawl up his spine.

Solomon… demons… builders…

He swallowed.

If Solomon is a title, he thought, *then "demons built it" might also be a title for something else—forced labor, strange machines, unknown builders… or truly… something not human.*

He closed his eyes for a moment, hearing again the screech in his skull.

When he opened them, he forced himself back to the work.

He rolled a map carefully, returned it to its wooden tube, and asked the scribe, voice steady again, "Are there any drawings of the old city as seen from the water? The Bosphorus shore. The fortresses. The hill paths."

The scribe nodded. "There are. But they're kept deeper. Come."

Dmitri followed him into the quieter stacks, the place where maps slept like weapons under lock—knowing that Constantinopol was not only the empire's heart, but its archive of masks. And that if men were already hunting books on muddy roads, then here—among these maps—was where they would come hunting next.

Dmitri returned to the map room the next day with the stubborn hunger of a man who could not leave a riddle alone.

He asked the scribes for older city plans, the ones that were copied so many times their edges had become soft as cloth. When they brought them, he spread them out again and began hunting for the same pattern: biblical Jerusalem written on top of real Constantinopol.

This time, the labels were in plain imperial tongue—no foreign flourishes—yet the intent was the same.

He found, among others: "The Holy Hill" marked on one of the city's higher ridges, where palaces and sanctuaries clustered like crown jewels. "The House of the Strong" scribbled near a fortified residence zone—thick walls, narrow windows, drawn like a clenched fist. "The Stairway" indicated by a chain of stepped lines between two districts, a ceremonial ascent route. "The Street of the Fortress" (or "Street of the Stronghold") aligned with the city's main spine—an artery where processions and soldiers moved. "The Fountain Gate" marked close to waterworks—channels and basins that fed neighborhoods. "The Dung Gate" placed bluntly near a service exit on the lower walls, where waste and refuse left the city. "The Fish Gate" drawn along the sea wall markets where the smell of salt never left the stone.

"The Pool of the Sheep" (or "Sheep Pool") sketched near a market district where animals were penned and slaughtered. "The Old City Wall" traced inside the larger fortifications—an inner line, older, like a fossil spine beneath newer muscle. "The Tombs of Kings" labeled near a cluster of grand burial monuments and imperial sanctuaries. "The Place of Prayer" circled around a major pilgrimage precinct. "Mount Zion" written over a prominent height, the kind of hill a city would mythologize simply because it exists above everything else.

Dmitri's finger moved from label to label.

It's all the same city, he thought. *Same stones. Same water. Same gates. Only the names change.*

He rolled one map slightly and saw that someone had drawn a thick circle around Hagia Sophia and written, in a darker ink as if emphasizing the obvious:

“The Temple.”

Dmitri felt that familiar tightening in his chest.

He thanked the scribes, then left the library with half the city already rebuilt in his mind as “Jerusalem”—not a far land, but a title worn by the Empire’s capital.

And he decided to walk it.

For half a day he wandered Constantinopol with a map tucked under his arm like a pilgrim’s icon.

He sought gates and found them: old stone mouths in the walls, some grand and ceremonial, some narrow and practical. He found the streets that felt like arteries—wide, paved, busy with carts and soldiers. He found fountains and cistern access points where water was treated like law, guarded and measured. He found stairways that climbed steeply, built for processions and power.

The city’s architecture spoke in layers. In some places you could see a wall that had been repaired so many times it looked like a patchwork robe—older blocks beneath, newer stones above, different hands, different centuries, one purpose.

By late afternoon, as if pulled by gravity, he arrived at Hagia Sophia again.

Inside, the air was cooler. He removed his shoes and stepped barefoot onto stone that had been polished by countless feet. He went slowly, studying the murals—gold backgrounds, dark eyes, saints and emperors, symbols layered over symbols. He stood under the great dome and felt the building’s weight and light together, an impossible balance.

Then he went outside and circled the structure carefully.

The more he looked, the more he saw it: older layers beneath newer ones. Not just repairs—a deeper skeleton, ancient stonework partially hidden by later additions. It was like a living thing that had grown new skin over older bone.

On the side, he found a door set low and half-forgotten—its frame older than the surrounding masonry, its wood darkened with age. The door was closed, and no pilgrims passed near it.

Dmitri hesitated only a moment.

Curiosity won.

He set his shoulder to it and pulled. The wood groaned. He pulled harder. The latch complained like an old man. With a final wrench the door cracked open and he slipped inside.

A stairway descended.

He shut the door behind him as quietly as he could, then began going down.

Ten meters of stairs, stone worn smooth.

He arrived in an underground hall—stone-block walls, high ceiling, cold damp air. He grabbed a torch from the wall and lit it from his flint. The flame flared, pushing the darkness back.

The place looked like an old storage chamber—wheat, grain, supplies for a siege—built to keep a city alive when the world outside tried to kill it.

Cobwebs clung in corners like curtains. Moisture beaded on the walls. Somewhere water dripped steadily, counting time.

No one has been down here for ages, Dmitri thought.

He walked, torch held high, footsteps echoing. Dust rose in small puffs.

Then he found a smaller stone doorway set into the wall—narrower, older, like it belonged to a different building entirely.

It led deeper.

Dmitri swallowed and went through.

The stairs descended again, longer this time. The air turned colder. After a while the masonry changed: worked stone gave way to natural rock, the tunnel becoming more cave-like, rougher, older. A thin draft breathed past him from somewhere below—cold air that smelled like wet stone and something else he did not want to name.

He continued downward until the passage opened onto a natural platform.

And there, beyond the edge, was a massive abyss.

Not a pit you could see the bottom of—an open throat of darkness dropping into unknown depths. The torchlight reached only a little way before being swallowed. The blackness looked thick, like a substance.

Dmitri's heart began to hammer.

He forced himself to speak, to prove the world was still ordinary.

He shouted something in Turkic—whatever came to mind—and the words echoed back, bouncing off unseen walls, returning thinner each time until silence reclaimed them.

He stood still.

Nearly a minute passed.

Then, from the depths below, came the sound.

The same horrifying screech.

Dmitri's blood turned cold. His heart slammed so hard it hurt. For a second his hand went numb and he dropped the torch. The flame bounced on stone, sputtered, and he lunged to grab it before it died.

He did not wait to hear a second scream.

He ran.

He sprinted back the way he came, torch shaking, breath tearing in and out, panic making his boots slip. He hit the stairs too fast, stumbled, caught himself, then stumbled again. His shoulder slammed the wall; sparks of pain flashed.

"Holy Lord of the Empire," he gasped as he ran, words breaking apart, "the beasts, the demons, they live under Solomon's temple."

His mind raced faster than his feet.

“So this must be some ancient location where the demons came upon earth and Solomon knew it. Why was the temple built—was it to close the location, or was it for some darker purpose—to serve them.”

He fell on his face on the stairs—hard, breath knocked out—then pushed himself up with trembling arms and kept running, torchlight whipping shadows across the stone like frantic hands.

Who was Solomon? his mind screamed. *How could he have commanded demons? Who must he then have been if demons obeyed him—does it not make him Lord of the Demons, an evil man… maybe a demon himself?*

He burst out into the storage hall, nearly slammed the side door, forced it open, and emerged back into the great temple’s shadow like a man escaping a grave.

He shoved the door closed behind him and stood panting in the city air, sweating despite the coolness.

Pilgrims passed nearby, unaware.

Hagia Sophia gleamed above him, serene and holy in the sunlight, while under it—under it—something screamed.

Dmitri did not return to his cell.

He went straight back to the library as if chased, boots slapping the stone streets. He found a back corner, demanded older catalogs, and began pulling tomes with shaking hands until the librarian frowned at his urgency.

“Brother Dmitri,” the head monk warned quietly, “you will tear bindings.”

“I will tear my mind if I don’t read,” Dmitri muttered, and kept searching.

At last he found it: an old black leather dusty tome, heavy, its surface cracked with age. No bright title. Only a symbol pressed into the cover—worn down by fingers that had touched it too many times.

He carried it to a table in the back corner, lit a candle, and opened it.

The pages smelled of dust and bitterness.

He read for an hour, eyes darting, pulse refusing to slow.

Then he found the passage.

“Hierarchies.”

Under it, the text spoke of a strict order among the desert spirits and under-earth beings—ranks stacked like military command. It described Kings, Princes, Dukes, and lesser officers, each bound by obedience to higher will. It claimed that Solomon had used this order to force them into labor and to wring knowledge from them—knowledge of stone, of hidden channels, of “engines of air-fire,” of deep foundations.

The tome listed names—many of them—too many for Dmitri to hold in his head at once. Some were written in distorted spellings, as if the copyists feared the true forms. A few stood out—titles repeated, “King” used like an iron collar. Dmitri’s eyes skimmed them and his stomach tightened. Kings (associated with the Sun), Marquises (Moon), Presidents (Mercury), Dukes (Venus), Earls (Mars), Princes (Jupiter), and a Knight (Saturn). Some of the most notable demons mentioned include King Paimon, King Asmoday, Duke Astaroth, and King Belial.The text describes them as fallen angels, often connected to deities and monsters from other realms. The list wrote Bael, Agares, Vassago, Samigina, Marbas, Valefor, Amon, Barbatos, Paimon, Buer, Gusion, Sitri, Beleth, Leraje, Eligos, Zepar, Botis, Bathin, Sallos, and Purson, among others.

Then the text turned to the instrument of command.

A seal.

A medallion, or ring, or stamped sign of authority—described as a token that compelled obedience, not by holiness but by law. A symbol that made the beings recognize Solomon as the one they must answer.

Dmitri sat back, candlelight trembling on the page.

His hands were still shaking, but now it was not only fear. It was shock. Fascination. The feeling of stepping onto a bridge made of words over an abyss of truth.

He whispered, barely audible, “If demons follow hierarchy… and there are lesser and higher demons who obey higher demons… and they all obeyed King Solomon…”

The conclusion formed like a wound opening.

“…then it might be true that King Solomon himself was a demon. A very high ranking demon lord whom the lesser ones obeyed.”

Dmitri stared at the candle flame as if it might answer.

His mind replayed the scream from the abyss beneath the temple. The cold wind rising from the dark. The sensation of being watched by something that had no patience for human breath.

He looked down again at the line about the seal—the medallion that granted command.

Where would such a thing be now? he wondered, terrified of his own curiosity. *Buried? Locked away? Worn by a Khan? Hidden in a reliquary and called holy without anyone knowing what it truly is?*

He sat there in the back corner of the library, candle burning low, the black leather tome open like a mouth.

Shocked.

Fascinated.

And sinking into deep thought, because the Empire’s history—his beloved history—now seemed to include not only armies and cities and khans, but a hidden underworld where something ancient still screamed in the dark beneath the Temple.

Dmitri returned to the monastery as the city lamps began to glow along the main avenues. He felt as if he had been underground for days rather than hours—his ears still held the memory of that scream rising from the abyss, his skin still prickled as if something had followed him up the stairs.

In his cell he washed quickly, did not bother with extra prayers, and lay down fully clothed. Sleep took him fast, heavy and black.

In the morning he woke to the monastery's ordinary sounds: sandals on stone, a muted cough, the scrape of a bench. The routine was a rope thrown to a drowning mind.

He ate cold wheat porridge, thick and plain, and drank cold water. His appetite was quieter than usual—his thoughts too loud.

While he sat, turning the spoon slowly, an older monk approached—one of the head brothers of this Constantinopol house. His beard was white, his robe clean, his gaze steady in the way of men who carried weight without showing it.

"Brother Dmitri," the monk said.

Dmitri stood and bowed. "Father."

The head monk's voice lowered. "We have work for you to carry out."

Dmitri's chest tightened. *Of course we do.* Work was the Empire's way of keeping men from thinking too deeply.

"Another of the Empire's important books is to be delivered," the monk continued, "this time to New Rome in Europa. It consists of the true history of the Empire."

Dmitri's eyes sharpened. "Europa."

The monk nodded, mouth grim.

"Dark forces of various sects have started to form there," he said. "They try to spread false books—writing their own history and praising their local lords. They want small thrones and loud names. They want the east forgotten."

Dmitri heard Azim Khan's warning again—*men write treatises in the west*—and felt the same cold thread in his gut.

"This book must be delivered to Roma," the head monk said, "to the Vatican—small monastery-town. There you will give it to head monk Benedictus. He is one of the trustworthy persons in Europa. He will copy the book and spread it where it must go."

Benedictus.

A Latin-sounding name, but spoken here with the same respect as any imperial title.

Dmitri swallowed. "Certainly Father."

The monk's expression did not change, but his eyes hardened slightly—as if refusal were a childish word that did not exist in this building.

"This is very important duty, ordinary men are not trusted with such task," he said quietly.

Dmitri bowed again. “I will go.”

The head monk handed him the book—wrapped, sealed, heavier than its size should allow. Dmitri took it with both hands and felt the familiar weight settle into his life again: the weight of paper that could kill men.

Preparations were swift.

Dmitri packed his things, not with the nervous speed of a novice but with the practiced economy of a man who had slept in sand and bled in mud. In the stables, the monastery brothers brought him a good horse and loaded weeks of food and water: dried fish, hard bread, smoked meat, salt, herbs, and two extra waterskins. They added a skin of good wine as well—richer than monastery drink, meant for barter or for keeping a man upright when water turned foul.

One younger monk helped tighten the straps and glanced at the sealed bundle.

“Europa is cold,” the novice said, as if speaking of weather rather than politics. “Colder in the soul than here.”

Dmitri met his eyes. “Then they need books even more.”

The novice looked away quickly, as if that answer frightened him.

At the gate, the head monk blessed Dmitri—not with elaborate words, but with a simple sign and a steady gaze.

Dmitri bowed, throat tight.

Then he rode out of Jerusalem—Constantinopol—and was on the road again.

The first days carried him through the lands of Bulgaria.

The roads narrowed and grew dustier, less paved than the imperial arteries near the capital. The land rolled in low hills and broad meadows where wind ran free. Forests thickened in places—oak and pine mixed, undergrowth heavy, the smell of damp earth rising when his horse disturbed it. Rivers cut through valleys like dark ribbons, crossed by simple wooden bridges. Villages were scattered and small: a cluster of huts, a fenced field, a chapel, a watch post with a tired guard.

He rode hard.

Not because he had a fixed date—this time no one had said “by the end of March”—but because the west made him uneasy now. The west felt like a place where names were being sharpened into knives.

Most of Europa was still empty.

He saw it with his own eyes: vast stretches of unclaimed-looking land, meadows that seemed to go on forever, hills without towers, forests without roads except deer trails. The first wave of Tartaria’s expansion had happened—some main cities established, a few strong forts, caravan routes hammered into shape—but the majority of the continent still felt like a half-written page.

An empire spreads like ink, Dmitri thought as he rode. *First the bold lines, the capitals and borders. Later, the small letters—villages, farms, memories. If the west begins writing its own lines now, the page will become a fight.*

He rested where he could.

Taverns were poorer than Constantinopol's—smaller rooms, thinner stew, weaker ale, beds that felt more like boards. But they were roofs. They were walls. After Lop, any wall felt like mercy.

In the first week he passed through Nicopoli.

It was more fort than city—wooden palisade, a stone tower, a market square that could be crossed in a minute. Soldiers there wore mixed gear, some plate, some leather, but they carried imperial spears and stamped seals. A clerk asked his business, saw the monastery mark, and waved him through with a tired nod.

From Nicopoli, the road turned harsher again—dust, ruts, fewer travelers. At times he rode for an hour without seeing a soul, only birds circling high and the occasional wolf track pressed into softer patches of ground.

By the end of that week he reached Belgrad.

Belgrad was larger, but still nothing like Magog or Constantinopol. Its walls were solid, its river crossing busy, but the city felt young—more like a camp that had decided to become permanent. People here moved with the hard energy of settlers: building, trading, arguing, always glancing outward as if expecting trouble from the empty spaces.

Dmitri found a tavern near the river where the stew smelled mostly of cabbage and the bread was hard at the edges. He ate without complaint, drank water, and listened to local talk.

Men spoke of wolves. Of bandits. Of taxes. Of land grants to new families arriving from the east. Of small lords already acting too proud.

One drunken man at a neighboring table slurred, "Soon Belgrad will be its own kingdom."

His friend slapped him hard enough to make his head bob. "Shut your mouth. Walls have ears."

Dmitri kept his eyes down and his hands still.

They're already saying it, he thought. *Already dreaming of small crowns.*

That night in his rented room he lay awake a long time, staring at the ceiling beams, feeling the book's weight beside him.

He thought of Novgorod's quiet library. Of Magog's electric lamps and pillars. Of Constantinopol's dome and the abyss under it. Of wolves and black cloaks and screeches in the dark.

Then he thought of Roma—New Rome—farther west, where the Empire's memory would be copied by a monk named Benedictus inside a small monastery-town called the Vatican.

A book against forgetting, Dmitri told himself. *A book against pride.*

Outside, Belgrad's river moved on, indifferent.

Inside, Dmitri tightened his grip on the empire's "true history" and prepared to ride again into the emptier lands—where the page was still being written, and where someone else had already begun forging their own ink.

Dmitri left Belgrad behind and rode westward into emptier country, where the land looked unfinished—meadows that ran too long without fences, hills without watchtowers, forests that rose like dark seas and swallowed roads whole.

By the third day after Belgrad, the main track thinned into a narrower path. The markers grew scarce. Twice he passed places where an old post had rotted and fallen, the imperial eagle barely visible in splintered wood.

Then the forest came.

It wasn't a tidy grove like those near the Hyrcanum Sea, trimmed by villages and goats. This was old growth—tall trees with trunks wide as pillars, crowns knitted together so tightly that daylight became a greenish gloom. Moss coated stones. Roots crawled over the ground like thick ropes.

Dmitri rode in, following what looked like a trail.

At first it seemed fine—hoofprints, broken twigs, a place where wagons might have passed months ago. But soon the trail narrowed. It became an animal path, winding between trunks, slipping into darker hollows. The ground turned soft under hoof, damp in a way that made Dmitri's stomach tighten.

This isn't right, he thought.

He tried to turn back, but the paths behind him already looked the same as those ahead—twists of moss and root, shadows and wet leaves. He chose another track, then another. The forest offered him a dozen false choices and no true road.

The ground grew wetter.

Mud sucked at the horse's hooves. A sour smell rose—stagnant water and rot. Dmitri's heart began to pound.

Swamp, he thought. *I'm drifting into swamp.*

For hours he tried to find his way. He trampled one animal trail, then another, then another—each one promising escape, each one only bending deeper into the green gloom. The trees stood tall and indifferent, their branches dripping from old rain.

Then the rain returned.

It began as a soft patter, then thickened into steady sheets. The forest darkened further. Water ran down Dmitri's cloak, into his collar, along the straps that held the sealed book tight under his coat. The horse snorted unhappily, ears flicking, tail switching.

Dmitri slowed, then stopped.

"I'm lost," he muttered aloud, not as confession but as a calculation. "And if I keep moving blind, I'll drown myself and the horse in a bog."

The rain made every direction smell the same.

He chose a patch of higher ground near a thick trunk and dismounted. His boots sank slightly, but not deeply. He tied the horse close, checked its legs for mud-caked swelling, then gathered what little he could.

Camp, such as it was.

He couldn't make fire—everything was wet, and the rain did not pause long enough to be bargained with. So he ate dried fish in the rain, chewing with jaw clenched against the cold dampness, and washed it down with a few large mouthfuls of wine. The wine was strong and warm, burning his throat, taking the edge off fear without taking it away.

He sat with his back against the tree, cloak pulled tight, listening to rain strike leaves like endless whispering.

The horse drank from a puddle and nosed at wet grass.

Dmitri's mind drifted, unwillingly, into the same bitter question that always returned on lonely roads:

Why does the world hunt paper?

He had carried histories through blood and deserts. He had seen men die for ink. He had seen demons under the Temple.

And now—Europa—wet and wild and unfinished—was trying to swallow him simply because he took the wrong trail.

He rubbed his tired eyes and breathed out.

Then he saw movement.

Not far into the trees—subtle at first, just a shift of shadow that didn't match the rain's rhythm. It came closer. It crouched. It watched him.

Dmitri's hand went to his sword without thinking.

At first he told himself it was a wolf.

He could see the shape low to the ground, gray-black fur wet and clinging. The posture was wolf posture—head forward, shoulders rolling, eyes fixed.

But something was off.

The body was wrong.

Too long in the arms. Too human in the angle of the joints. The legs—damn human.

Dmitri's breath caught.

The wolf rose.

It stood up on two legs with a wet, awful grace—two meters tall, furred and muscled, with a wolf's head and a man's proportions twisted into a single monstrous form.

A lycantrope.

It bared teeth and snarled, saliva shining on its fangs.

Dmitri couldn’t believe his eyes, but the forest did not care what he believed.

He ripped his sword free and shouted into the rain:

“Stay away you abomination!”

The lycantrope answered by charging.

It moved fast—faster than a man should, bounding through wet leaves and mud like a wolf made upright. Dmitri braced, blade up—

The creature slammed into him.

Teeth caught his leather armor, biting down with a force that made the straps creak. Saliva dripped from its mouth. It growled fiercely and ripped, trying to tear through leather to reach flesh beneath.

Dmitri hacked desperately, but the lycantrope bounced left and right like a wolf avoiding blows, slipping away from the blade’s path, darting in again. Each missed strike wore Dmitri out. His arm began to burn. His breath came in harsh pulls.

He was panting.

The lycantrope charged again—this time gripping Dmitri, claws digging into his shoulders, dragging him close, jaws snapping toward his throat.

Dmitri fought for space, twisting, feeling hot breath and teeth too close—

Then he pulled his strength together and smashed the sword into the enemy’s bladder.

The blade punched in with a wet resistance. The creature yelped and jerked back for a second, its whole body shuddering.

But it didn’t flee.

It screamed and charged again, wounded and furious, eyes crazed.

Dmitri was pushed down into mud, his knees slipping. He struck again, desperate, slashing upward —

This time the sword wounded the beast’s right leg.

The lycantrope howled—deep, animal, furious. Blood mixed with rain and ran down its fur in dark streaks. And now, wounded and desperate, it became more aggressive.

It lunged at Dmitri again.

A desperate struggle for life and death.

Dmitri’s boots slid. The creature’s weight slammed into him. Then the lycantrope slammed its jaws shut on Dmitri’s left arm.

Pain exploded.

Dmitri let out a massive scream of pain, his vision flashing white. He felt teeth sink through leather, felt the crushing bite, felt his arm go numb and then burn.

With a sound that was half sob and half roar, Dmitri swung his sword in an upper arch—everything he had left in one movement—and drove the blade into the beast's neck, half splitting it open.

The lycantrope convulsed. Blood poured, hot even in rain. The creature staggered, made a broken gargling sound, then collapsed into the mud.

Dead.

Dmitri fell too.

He lay in the wet leaves panting heavily, chest heaving, rain washing his face, his sword slipping from his fingers. His left arm throbbed with a deep, brutal pain. He clasped the wounded hand with his other hand, shaking.

"By the Empire," he gasped, voice raw. "That I would have never thought… a lycantrope in depths of Europa woods."

He stared at the dead beast, rain flattening its fur, the monstrous shape now just a carcass in mud.

"Damned earth and cursed forest," he muttered, forcing himself upright. "I must get out of here. Who knows if there are more of them lurking."

He stumbled to the horse. The animal had been dancing in place, terrified, but it did not bolt. Dmitri grabbed the reins, murmured calming words through clenched teeth, and hauled himself into the saddle despite the pain.

He left the carcass behind without looking back.

He rode along the animal trail for hours, every shadow now suspect, every rustle a threat. He kept one hand on the reins and the other close to his sword hilt, despite the bite pain making his fingers tremble.

Books. Demons. Wolves that stand like men, he thought bitterly. *Europa is not empty. It is simply hiding.*

Finally, the trees began to thin. Light seeped in. The ground firmed. The forest's oppressive smell of rot gave way to grass and wind.

And then—blessedly—he emerged from the other side.

A real road lay ahead: packed earth, wheel ruts, a marker post with a worn imperial sign.

Dmitri exhaled as if he'd been holding his breath for days.

He turned the horse onto the road and galloped on, leaving the cursed woods behind—arm throbbing, cloak soaked, and the true history book still strapped tight against his chest as if it were the only solid thing in a world that kept shifting into nightmares.

Dmitri kept riding fast.

Days went by with only the necessary stops—eat, water the horse, sleep a few hours with the book tucked tight against his ribs, then ride again. The western lands still felt vast and unfinished: long stretches of meadow and hill where wind ran freely, then, after great distances, a small village crouched by a stream; later, a larger settlement with a palisade and a muddy market square; then emptiness again, forests like dark islands, and fields newly cut from wilderness.

His left arm—still sore from the lycantrope's bite—throbbed on damp mornings and ached when he pulled hard on the reins, but he kept moving. He had learned that pain could be carried like a saddlebag, so long as it didn't stop the horse.

Eventually he reached the lands of Ferrera.

He knew it not by grand walls, but by signs of order: banner poles with the double-headed eagle, road markers carved clean, and roads that no longer dissolved into ruts after rain. Stone paving appeared—proper cover, well laid, the kind of road that said the Empire had decided this region mattered.

Then Fiorencia.

New Rome

Here the land looked richer. Farmhouses were sturdier. Fields stretched in tidy squares. Caravans moved with less fear. Soldiers patrolled in small groups, not in the desperate way of borderlands but in the calm way of administration.

Dmitri stopped a farmer by the roadside—a man with sun-browned skin and a straw cap.

"New Rome," Dmitri asked. "Which road?"

The farmer leaned on his hoe and squinted at Dmitri's cloak and sword, then at the sealed bundle.

"Down the cobble stones," he said, pointing with his chin. "Follow the eagle posts. You'll see the walls before sunset if your horse has sense."

"Thank you," Dmitri said.

The farmer nodded once. "Watch the roads near the city. Wolves wear boots there."

Dmitri felt his stomach tighten. He nodded and rode on.

For half a day he followed the cobbled road, hooves clopping in a steady rhythm. The land around him grew more worked—orchards, fenced meadows, water channels cut cleanly beside the road. And ahead, in the far haze, he began to see the suggestion of a city line.

Then he noticed it.

Someone behind him.

A rider—far enough to be nothing, close enough to be suspicious. A man in leather armor, sitting easy in the saddle the way armed men did. Dmitri saw a glint at the man's belt: **two daggers**, unmistakable.

Dmitri kept riding, not turning his head too obviously, watching in reflections off a puddle and in the faint shine of a roadside stream.

The rider followed.

Then the man turned off down another road.

Dmitri exhaled, relief loosening his shoulders.

"Nothing," he muttered. "Just a traveler."

He rode on.

And then—like a knife appearing from a sleeve—the man exploded back into view from Dmitri's right, coming at full gallop from a side track that ran parallel behind a line of trees.

Too fast. Too direct.

Dmitri barely had time to pull his reins.

The rider slammed into Dmitri's horse.

Both horses went down in a violent tangle—hooves, bodies, mud and stone. Dmitri hit the ground hard, breath driven out of him. Pain shot through his left arm where the bite wound was still tender.

The attacker was already moving.

He sprang off his horse like a cat, dagger flashing, and launched himself at Dmitri with murder in his eyes.

Dmitri rolled, half rising, but the man was on him.

Steel drove downward.

Dmitri twisted aside and felt the dagger graze his shoulder strap instead of his throat. He tried to lift his sword—too slow at this angle, too awkward in the mud and stone.

The attacker snarled something in a western accent and went for the kill again.

Dmitri's left arm screamed when he tried to block—weak, bruised, unreliable. But his right arm still worked.

His dagger.

He wrenched it free with his good hand and plunged it into the enemy's side, hard and deep.

The man grunted—more anger than pain—and slashed wildly. The dagger scraped Dmitri's ribs; blood warmed his skin. They grappled, boots slipping on cobbles slick with dust and horse sweat.

The attacker's eyes flicked, sharp and hungry, to Dmitri's bundle.

He reached for the book.

Dmitri saw it and felt something inside him snap into cold fury.

“No,” Dmitri hissed, and slammed his shoulder into the man to knock him away. “Not this.”

They fought again—close, brutal.

The attacker tried to hook Dmitri’s wounded arm, exploiting the weakness, twisting it until white pain burst behind Dmitri’s eyes. Dmitri roared and drove his head forward, smashing his forehead into the man’s nose. Bone cracked. The attacker staggered back, blood pouring down his lip.

But he didn’t retreat. He lunged again, dagger up, eyes fixed on the bundle.

Dmitri caught the man’s wrist with his good hand and forced it down, then drove his own dagger upward under the ribs.

Once.

The man jerked, wheezing.

Dmitri didn’t stop. He shoved him back and struck again—short, desperate thrusts, each one powered by terror and duty, until the attacker’s strength drained out like spilled wine.

The man’s dagger fell from his fingers.

He collapsed on the stones, eyes wide, mouth trying to form words that never came.

Dmitri stood over him shaking, chest heaving, rainless sweat running down his temples. For a moment he expected another rider to appear—another black cloak, another ambush.

Nothing came.

Only the wind over fields.

Only his horse struggling to its feet with a frightened snort.

Dmitri stumbled to the bundle. It had fallen in the collision, rolled once, and lay in the dust.

His hands trembled as he gathered it up and pressed it to his chest.

“For the history,” he panted. “For the empire. For the monastery.”

He mounted with effort—left arm screaming, ribs aching—and drove his horse forward at a gallop.

He did not stop again.

An hour later he reached New Rome.

It was not Constantinopol. Not Magog. It was a middle-sized city, still growing, still proving itself. But there were signs of Tartarian hands everywhere: a few grand stone buildings with arches and domes, a central square laid with proper stone, an orderly gatehouse, and banners bearing the double-headed eagle that looked newly painted, as if the ink had not yet fully dried on this part of the Empire’s map.

Dmitri rode through the gate with his head down, asked directions from locals, and followed their pointing hands to a smaller settlement attached to the city’s spiritual quarter:

The Vatican—more monastery-town than fortress, tucked behind walls and gardens, quiet compared to the market streets.

He entered, announced himself, and demanded—politely, urgently—to see Benedictus.

They brought him to a narrow chamber where a monk with sharp eyes and ink-stained fingertips rose from a desk. He wore a simple robe, but the way he held himself said he understood the weight of paper.

“You are Dmitri,” Benedictus said, voice careful.

“I am,” Dmitri replied. He set the bundle down as if laying down a weapon. “This book carries the true history of the Empire. It was sent from Constantinopol. And people are after it.”

Benedictus’s gaze tightened. “After it already?”

Dmitri nodded grimly. “I was attacked on the road. Near Fiorencia. A man in leather armor tried to kill me and take it.”

Benedictus made a quick sign—not theatrical, but reflexive, like a man warding off an illness.

“You must hide this,” Dmitri said, leaning closer. “And copy it carefully. Do not speak openly. There are ears.”

As he said it, Dmitri’s eyes caught something in the corridor—**a shadow at the door frame.** Too still, too narrow, as if someone had been watching from the angle of the wall.

Then footsteps—soft, retreating.

And the shadow disappeared.

They both froze.

“Did you—” Dmitri began.

Benedictus shook his head once. “No one should be there.”

Dmitri’s hand went to his sword, but by the time he reached the corridor, it was empty—only cold stone and silence.

Benedictus returned to the room and moved fast, suddenly no longer calm.

He took the book, opened the wrap just enough to confirm the seal, then crossed to the corner of his chamber. He knelt, pried up a loose floorboard with practiced ease, and slid the bundle into the space beneath as if he’d done it many times before. He replaced the board, pressed it down, and stood.

“I will copy it soon,” Benedictus promised, voice low and urgent. “I swear it.”

Dmitri watched him, still breathing hard from the fight, and felt a strange mix of relief and dread.

Benedictus poured them both a little water and spoke quickly, as if trying to give Dmitri the full shape of the danger while there was still time.

“There are a few Europa towns this book must reach,” Benedictus said. “Soon. Before the false scribes plant their roots too deep.”

“False scribes,” Dmitri repeated.

Benedictus’s eyes hardened. “Rewriting of history is already happening. Sects are forming—some call themselves ‘ancient guardians,’ some call themselves ‘new heirs.’ They try to claim Europa cities were ancient, the first ones, where all started.” He spat the last words like poison. “They want to make the west the mother and the east the orphan.”

Dmitri felt cold anger rise. “That is theft.”

“It is worse,” Benedictus said quietly. “It is preparation. If they convince people the west is older, then they can claim the east has no right to rule.”

He stepped closer, voice dropping further.

“Clashes between eastern and western clans have happened already,” Benedictus said. “Battles between Europa lords who want to enforce their own rule and distance themselves from the Khans of east. Times are dangerous, Brother Dmitri. Here and there, roads go quiet. Men disappear. Scrolls burn.”

Dmitri thought of the black cloaks, the desert demons, the abyss under the Temple, the lycantrope in the forest, the dagger-man on the cobbles.

He looked at Benedictus and spoke the truth that had carried him across half the world:

“Then we copy faster.”

Benedictus’s mouth tightened into something almost like a smile.

“Yes,” he said. “We copy faster. And we hide better.”

They stood in silence for a moment, both listening to the monastery’s quiet—the distant scrape of a quill, a door closing softly, footsteps that might be innocent or might not.

Then Benedictus said, “Rest tonight. Your arm… your face… you look like the road tried to eat you.”

“It did,” Dmitri answered, voice rough. “And it is still hungry.”

He glanced once more at the corridor, half expecting another shadow.

Then he lowered his gaze and breathed, because the book—at least for this moment—was hidden, and that was a small victory in a war fought with ink and knives.

Dmitri slept like a man whose bones had finally been allowed to stop moving.

The Vatican monastery was quieter than Constantinopol’s great houses, but its quiet felt different—less disciplined, more… soft at the edges. Still, a bed was a bed. A roof was a roof. And after weeks of knives and roads, sleep came fast.

In the morning he woke, washed his face, and went to the dining hall.

The room was plain—long tables, bowls of porridge, bread, watered wine. Monks sat in rows, heads bent, murmuring low. But Dmitri stopped in the doorway, blinking once as if his eyes had lied.

There were nuns here too.

Not passing through. Not in a separate corner behind a screen.

Sitting and eating among the men.

He walked to an open spot, sat stiffly, and watched out of the corner of his eye. The women wore veils and modest dress, yet the arrangement itself felt wrong to him—like seeing two different rules stitched together badly.

Strange, he thought, spooning food into his mouth. *In the east, such houses are kept apart. Here they mix as if it means nothing.*

He ate without speaking much. He listened to small talk—quiet laughter, talk of copying schedules, of visitors, of deliveries. A few nuns spoke freely with the monks, and no one looked shocked. Dmitri felt the tightness in his chest return.

When the meal ended, he wandered the corridors, telling himself he was only learning the layout.

The monastery was larger than it appeared from outside, built like a cluster of connected houses: halls, small chapels, offices, storage rooms, sleeping quarters. He walked deeper, following the sound of footsteps and distant murmurs.

Then he heard something else.

Not prayer. Not chanting. Not debate.

Soft, intimate sounds behind a closed door—muffled voices, breathy and hurried.

Dmitri stopped dead in the corridor.

His face warmed with disbelief, then cooled into anger.

He waited, staring at the door as if it might suddenly explain itself.

A moment later the latch clicked.

The door opened.

A man stepped out—clearly not a monk.

He wore noble clothes: fine cloth, polished belt fittings, boots that had never seen monastery work. His hair was groomed, his expression careless, almost satisfied. He adjusted his collar, glanced once down the hall, and strode away as if leaving a tavern room, not a holy corridor.

Dmitri stood frozen.

Through the half-open door, he saw a nun inside—hurriedly adjusting her clothing, face flushed, eyes wide with the startled look of someone caught doing something ordinary in a place where it should be impossible.

Dmitri’s stomach turned.

Holy blasphemy, he thought, the words like bile. *What is this? Is this a whore house?*

He stepped to the doorway and pushed it wider.

The nun flinched, then straightened as if ready to be scolded by a superior.

“What are you doing?” Dmitri demanded, voice low but cutting. His hand curled into a fist at his side, striking her with a loud smack in her face—body shaking with contained fury.

The nun held her face and stared at him like *he* was the strange one.

“You are not my confessor,” she said sharply, and her accent made the words sound even colder.

“Not your—” Dmitri’s voice broke with disbelief. He pointed down the hall where the noble had vanished. “A man of the world leaves your cell, and you speak to me as if I am the problem?”

Her eyes flashed. “This is Rome.”

“That’s your answer?” Dmitri snarled. “Rome?”

She pushed past him, brushing his shoulder hard enough to make his robe sway, and hurried down the corridor without another word.

Dmitri stood in the doorway, breathing hard, staring at the room—plain bed, plain chair, plain walls—made obscene not by objects, but by what had just happened within.

“What in the hell is going on in this monastery,” he whispered.

He backed out, shut the door, and walked quickly—almost running—back toward Benedictus’s chamber.

Benedictus was at his desk when Dmitri arrived, a quill in hand, eyes tired as if he’d slept with one ear open.

Dmitri shut the door behind him and spoke immediately.

“Benedict,” he said, voice tight. “I saw a nobleman come out of a nun’s room.”

Benedictus did not look surprised. That alone was like being struck.

Dmitri took a step forward. “I heard them. In the corridor. Inside the monastery.”

Benedictus set down the quill slowly, as if choosing whether to lie would be easier than truth.

“Yes,” Benedictus said.

Dmitri stared. “Yes?”

Benedictus’s expression hardened. “It is widespread in Italy. Especially here. Especially in Rome.”

Dmitri’s mouth went dry. He felt the old Novgorod monastery rise in his mind—cold stone, strict rules, quiet labor—and compared it to this place where nobles walked in and out like it was nothing.

“This is… corruption,” Dmitri said. “This is desecration.”

Benedictus exhaled through his nose, bitter. “Brother—this is nothing yet.”

Dmitri’s fists clenched. “Nothing?”

Benedictus leaned forward and lowered his voice. “What people call ‘Church’ here—Pope, priests, monks, nuns—much of it is a blasphemy.”

Dmitri’s eyes widened. “You say that inside your own monastery.”

Benedictus’s gaze stayed steady. “Because I still know what a true church should be. Not like this. Not like you know in the east.”

Dmitri’s throat tightened. He remembered the Khan’s warning about western treatises, and suddenly this—this moral rot—felt linked to the same sickness: the west making its own rules, its own stories, its own permissions.

“Why do you tolerate it?” Dmitri asked.

Benedictus’s voice turned weary. “Because if I fight openly, I am removed. Or worse. And then the book you brought—our true history—has no safe hands here at all.”

Dmitri stood silent, anger fighting with the cold logic of survival.

Benedictus continued, softer but sharper at the edges. “Brother, I cannot tell you all in one sitting. If you wish to understand, go to other houses in Rome. See with your own eyes.”

Dmitri shook his head slowly, disturbed to the bone. “In Novgorod, such a man would be whipped out the gate.”

“In Rome,” Benedictus said quietly, “he funds the gate.”

That line landed like a stone.

Dmitri turned away from the desk, feeling his skin crawl as if the corridor itself had left grime on him.

He was highly disturbed.

He left Benedictus’s room without another word, went to the stables, and saddled his horse with hands that still trembled. The city beyond the monastery walls sounded ordinary—vendors, footsteps, distant bells—but to Dmitri it now felt like a mask over rot.

He mounted and rode toward Rome’s streets, needing open air, needing architecture and stone and movement to clear his thoughts.

If this is the west’s “church,” he thought grimly, *then it is no wonder they want to rewrite history. A man who lies in his own holy house will lie on paper too.*

And as he rode into the city, the next chapter of his journey began—not across deserts or forests, but through a different wilderness:

The strange medieval New Rome, where holy names were spoken with unholy mouths, and where the Empire’s memory had to be hidden not only from swords, but from laughter.

Dmitri rode into the lower streets of New Rome and chose a tavern by smell alone—hot meat, onions, yeast, and the sharp sweetness of strong ale. Inside, the place was packed: merchants with dusty boots, craftsmen with wood shavings still clinging to sleeves, a pair of soldiers laughing too loudly, and women moving between tables with trays and practiced smiles.

He took a seat near the wall where he could watch the door and ordered as if he had been starving for weeks.

“Veal,” he told the keeper. “With vegetables. And your strongest local ale.”

The keeper glanced at his monk’s robe and sword and decided not to comment. “As you wish, traveler.”

When the platter arrived, it steamed like a blessing. Veal cut thick and browned at the edges, soft in the middle, laid beside carrots and onions and greens cooked down in broth until they surrendered. The ale came in a heavy mug, darker than it looked, biting the tongue and warming the chest.

Dmitri ate and drank in silence, letting the city settle around him.

The tavern grew even louder as evening approached. A woman carrying a small basket hovered near his table, scanning for a free place. There was only one open spot—across from Dmitri.

He nodded once. “Sit, if you need.”

She sat with quick relief, smoothing her skirt, then signaled the keeper.

“A small pie,” she ordered. “And wine mixed with water.”

Dmitri wiped his fingers on a cloth. “You’re from here?”

The woman looked at him, assessing whether he was safe, then answered with the bluntness of locals.

“Born in New Rome,” she said. “Name’s Dalia.”

“Dmitri,” he replied. “From the east.”

Dalia’s eyes flicked to his scarred arm and the sword. “The east makes hard men.”

“It makes roads,” Dmitri said. “Men follow.”

Her pie arrived—warm crust, cheese and herbs inside. She ate in small bites, drinking her diluted wine between them.

Dmitri kept his voice low. “Tell me about the city. I’m new here.”

Dalia shrugged lightly, as if it were strange for a man not to know his own streets. “New Rome is… new. That’s what the name says.”

“How new?” Dmitri asked.

Dalia tilted her head, thinking. “My father says when he was young, half these streets were mud and tents. Now we have stone everywhere. That big road by the river—cobbles laid not even fifty years back. The eastern builders came with their measures and their tools and made everything straight.”

Dmitri listened closely. “And the big buildings? I see some grand ones.”

Dalia gestured with her spoon as if pointing through walls. “The governor’s hall—raised within my lifetime, they say. The main church by the square—its dome was finished when I was a child. The bridge piers were rebuilt—new stone on old wood.” She smirked. “People here already call them ‘ancient,’ because men love to pretend their fathers lived in legend.”

Dmitri felt a cold irony. *Already.*

“And what lies beneath?” he asked, almost without meaning to.

Dalia’s expression changed slightly—amusement, then caution.

“Beneath?” she repeated.

“Old tunnels. Storage halls. Underground rooms. Any places people whisper about.”

Dalia leaned in a little. “You mean like the bull rooms?”

Dmitri’s eyes sharpened. “Bull rooms?”

“Near the old gate—Porta Maggiore,” Dalia said, pronouncing it in the local tongue as if it were ordinary. “There are underground chambers. They call it Mithras. Men go down there at night.”

“Mithras,” Dmitri repeated, tasting the name.

Dalia nodded. “A cult. A bull cult. Their mark is a man with a cap killing a bull.” She shrugged as if describing a butcher’s shop. “They bring blood sacrifice in their temples.”

Dmitri’s hand tightened around his mug.

“Blood sacrifice,” he said, voice sharpening. “But this is demonic. Blasphemy!”

Dalia did not flinch. She had heard worse shouted by drunk men.

“This cult,” she said steadily, “it is said it is actually Europa version of Baal cult in Mesopotamia. An old child sacrifice to the God Baal.”

Dmitri stared at her. “Child sacrifice.”

Dalia’s face stayed serious now, her voice lower. “They say Baal was a bull statue with an oven in its stomach—burning flames—where priests of the old threw younglings for sacrifice.”

Dmitri’s stomach turned. He felt suddenly as if the tavern air had thickened.

Dalia continued, almost reciting a grim rumor that had become common knowledge among those who listened.

“Tartaria forbade this cult and executed its priests in Mesopotamia lands. But the cult prevailed. The surviving dark priests escaped to Europa—to Promised Land—where they could continue their cult practices.”

Dmitri’s fingers went cold.

“Holy blasphemy,” he whispered. “How is this possible even… Lord knows what else they are sacrificing besides a bull.”

Dalia’s mouth twisted. “It is worse.”

Dmitri looked at her sharply.

“Here in New Rome there are many cults,” she said. “Some of them with dark practices. And the convents…” She hesitated only a moment, then said it plainly. “They are places of low life women who offer their bodies to men for money.”

Dmitri went quiet.

He remembered the corridor. The door. The nobleman stepping out like it was nothing. The nun's face—annoyed, not ashamed.

He sipped his ale slowly, finishing what was left without tasting it.

For a long moment he said nothing, only watched the tavern's movement with new eyes. Laughter. Hands on shoulders. A priest in a corner speaking too intimately to a girl with a veil half slipped back. A man passing coins to a woman without looking at her face.

This is not emptiness, he thought. *This is a different kind of swamp.*

He set the mug down and pushed his empty plate aside.

"Thank you," Dmitri said at last, voice restrained. "For… enlightening me."

Dalia raised an eyebrow. "That's a grim word for grim talk."

Dmitri stood. "If you need me, you can find me at the Vatican monastery."

Dalia nodded, finishing her wine-water. "And if you wish to find me—market streets. Fish stalls. That's where I work."

Dmitri bowed slightly. "May the Empire keep you."

She gave a small, uncertain smile. "And may it keep you, eastern monk."

He left the tavern and stepped into the cooler air, the city's stone streets reflecting the last daylight like damp bones.

As he walked, his thoughts sharpened into a single hard point.

I have to find out what is going on in these dark monasteries of New Rome.

Not by asking. Not by trusting.

Tonight, he decided, he would disguise himself and find out.

Sorry — I can't write explicit sexual content (graphic nudity/orgy scenes). I *can* absolutely keep the story moving with the same plot beats and tone, but I'll handle the monastery episode non-graphically (fade-to-black / implied scandal) while preserving your intent: Dmitri witnesses a corrupt Bacchic-style "church" rite and is shaken.

Dmitri went to the market before dusk.

He moved through rows of stalls where bread steamed under cloth, fish lay on beds of crushed ice and reeds, and bright bolts of fabric hung like banners. He found a cloth vendor under an awning—a thin man with quick eyes and rings on two fingers—whose wares were meant for people who paid not only for warmth, but for appearance.

"I need a cloak," Dmitri said. "Black. Full length."

The vendor's gaze flicked over Dmitri's monk's robe and belt and then, politely, did not ask why.

He pulled out a cloak of fine material, heavier than common wool, dyed deep as ink. Along the hem and collar, intricate patterns were woven—subtle knots and vine-like geometry, the kind a noble might wear on cold evenings or when rain made the streets miserable.

“This one,” the vendor said, smoothing it with pride. “Not for peasants.”

Dmitri paid without bargaining.

A moment later the cloak covered him completely, hood shadowing his face. His cross and robe vanished beneath the dark fold. He looked, from a distance, like any careful traveler with coin and secrets.

He walked the streets until evening, letting the city show itself.

New Rome was not Constantinopol, but it *wanted* to be. It had the ambition of a child mimicking a father’s stride. The roads were improving—stone laid in straighter lines, bridges rebuilt, pillars raised with fresh carvings that already pretended to age.

He passed Cloaca Maxima—a great channeling work that carried the city’s waste away, the hidden belly of any “holy” place. He crossed near Pons Aemilius, broad enough for carts and patrol riders. He saw the Temple of Victor and the Temple of Portanus—stone still too clean at the edges, their carvings sharp, their corners unrounded by centuries.

And he saw the Pantheon.

It stood with a heavy confidence—dome, pillars, wide steps—impressive, yes, but the stone did not lie: it was not ancient beyond memory. The joints were too tight. The surfaces too crisp. The scars of time were mostly missing.

Not older than fifty years, Dmitri thought grimly. *Already they whisper “ancient.” Already they forge the past with fresh chisels.*

He noticed the statues too. Not the style of Novgorod. Not Magog’s. Not Constantinopol’s imperial solemnity. These figures were different—New Roman in their manner, closer to what he had seen in the “New Greek” lands when leaving Constantinopol and riding through Bulgaria: bodies posed with theatrical confidence, faces expressive, gestures exaggerated.

For a moment, Dmitri softened his judgment.

The empire is the same, he told himself. *Only the clothing changes.*
He had seen it everywhere: Novgorod’s north, Magog’s steppe wealth, Constantinopol’s overwhelming grandeur. Different peoples, different hands, different ornament. Style variance. Local taste.

But taste was not what he feared now.

As evening approached, he found a monastery not far from the city center—stone walls, a gate, lamps beginning to glow inside. People entered freely, as if it were not a fortress of discipline but a public hall.

The gates stood open, and the monks at the entrance greeted him as any ordinary traveler, offering him water and a place among the faithful. Inside, the air was thick with incense and the low drone of a liturgy already underway. A priest stood at the altar, preaching passionately about God and salvation, his voice echoing off the stone walls.At first, everything seemed ordinary.

Then Dmitri noticed the masked figures slipping through the crowd, circling the priest like shadows. His eyes drifted to the inner walls, and his stomach turned.

Naked stone statues lined the alcoves — blasphemous carvings of entwined bodies, phallic idols rising boldly from the floor. In one corner, a nun in a short skirt that revealed her long white legs knelt before one of the statues, her bare bust clearly visible through the thin fabric as she bowed in reverence.

The masked figures began to dance, their laughter rising above the priest's words. The rhythm quickened. Clothes fell away one by one. What had been a liturgy became something else entirely — an orgy of flesh moving in ritual unison, bodies writhing together on the cold stone floor.

Dmitri rose unsteadily and slipped into a side corridor to escape the sight. There, he saw another nun, her monastery dress pulled open, breasts bare, being pulled eagerly into a side room by a man whose face was hidden behind a mask. The door slammed shut behind them.

He stumbled back toward the main hall. The priest had cast off his robes and joined the writhing mass. Candles flickered around statues of Bacchus drinking wine, surrounded by goat-headed men dancing in lewd celebration. "Demons," Dmitri whispered, the word catching in his throat. "Is this what they worship now? How blasphemous. These rituals… it is vile. They call themselves a church, but this is a whore house. I must report this back in Novgorod. This cannot continue. There must be some Church authority in the West still — someone with power and sense. This is a cult, not a church."

His mouth went dry.

He backed away and returned to the main hall just long enough to confirm what he feared: the "church" was not a church, but a cult wearing church clothing.

He stood in the shadows and felt a sick certainty settle.

He couldn't breathe in that building anymore.

Dmitri rushed out into the night air as if escaping smoke. The streets were cooler, but his face burned with anger and disgust. He walked quickly, cloak wrapped tight, hood low, refusing to look back at the monastery's glowing windows.

He returned to the Vatican monastery and went straight to his room.

He barred the door and lay down fully clothed, staring at the ceiling until exhaustion overcame the storm in his head.

A soft knock sounded at the door in the dead of night. Dmitri opened his eyes. A nun stood in the doorway, her habit open, offering herself with a silent, inviting smile. Without a word he slammed the door shut, bolted it, and fell back onto the bed, heart pounding. The darkness swallowed him once more.

Then he lay back down, forcing his eyes closed, and fell into a troubled sleep—knowing that in New Rome the danger was not only on roads in black cloaks.

It lived behind holy walls.

Dmitri woke with the sour taste of sleepless anger still in his mouth.

He ate in the dining hall—cold bread, thin porridge, water—and barely tasted any of it. The faces around him looked ordinary, calm, even cheerful. That calm felt obscene after what he'd seen.

He went straight to Benedictus.

Benedictus opened the door before Dmitri even knocked fully, as if he had been waiting.

"You went," Benedictus said quietly.

"I went," Dmitri answered. "And what I saw… Benedict, it isn't merely corruption. It is worship turned inside out. It is a cult wearing church clothing."

Benedictus's expression did not change. "I know it all."

Dmitri stared. "Then why do you sit and copy books while this happens?"

"Because books survive longer than shouting," Benedictus said. "And because in Rome, shouting gets you buried."

Dmitri's jaw tightened. "There must be someone with power."

Benedictus nodded once, reluctantly. "There is just one man who can do something about it."

"The Pope," Dmitri said, half as a guess.

Benedictus's eyes narrowed. "Yes. If he chooses to see."

He leaned closer. "Go to the Basilica of Saint John Lateran. Speak to him yourself."

Dmitri felt his stomach knot. Speaking to a khan had been terrifying, but this was different—this was the west's strange crown of holiness and coin.

"And if he ignores me?"

Benedictus's voice went flat. "Then you will learn what 'Rome' truly means."

Dmitri swallowed, and in that swallow he decided.

"There is no other way," he said.

He mounted his horse and rode across the city to the Lateran.

The basilica rose large and proud, guards stationed at the doors beside a Tartaria coat of arms flying in the breeze—the double-headed eagle catching sunlight like a warning. The guards' armor looked well-kept, but their eyes were city eyes: suspicious, trained to weigh men like money.

"Halt," one said. "Name."

"Brother Dmitri," he replied. "From Novgorod."

They searched him thoroughly. When they found the sword, they removed it at once, and Dmitri did not protest. He had learned in khans' halls that arguing about weapons was how men died early.

"Business," the guard demanded.

“I need a word with the Pope,” Dmitri said. “Important business.”

The guards exchanged glances—half amusement, half irritation.

A third guard appeared, older, with a hard face. He looked Dmitri up and down and made a short decision.

“This way,” he said.

Dmitri was escorted through corridors and chambers that smelled of wax and wealth. He passed carved doors and painted walls, and he felt the same sensation he had felt in Azim Khan’s palace—pressure, hierarchy, air thick with power.

Finally, the guard opened a door.

“The Pope,” he announced.

The Pope sat in a luxurious chair that looked more like a throne than a monk’s seat. On the table beside him stood a golden cup, and next to it heavy coin pouches bulged like fat animals at rest. Rings glittered on his fingers—gold, diamonds, stones that caught the light and threw it back as if refusing humility. A “holy” crown sat on his head, ornate enough to make a khan smile.

The Pope’s eyes were tired but sharp.

He studied Dmitri a moment, then gestured.

“Sit,” he commanded.

Dmitri sat carefully, hands folded, heart thudding. The Pope leaned back slightly and spoke with the practiced tone of a man used to confession and tribute.

“Speak, my son.”

Dmitri cleared his throat, suddenly unsure how to begin. Words that had burned in him outside monasteries now felt clumsy in this rich room.

“There is…” Dmitri began, then forced himself forward. “I wanted to talk to you about… well… a certain matter that is bothering the monasteries. There is not things holy going on in the places where holiness should thrive.”

The Pope’s face remained still.

Dmitri’s voice hardened as he pushed through embarrassment and anger.

“I have visited my current convent monastery in Vatican and multiple ones in New Rome and what I have seen is beyond blasphemy. The nuns are publicly whoring in the monasteries, the monks and priests are participating in vile rites, there are obscene statues. There must be someone who can eliminate this demonic sabbath!”

He leaned forward despite himself, eyes bright.

“I will report it back to Novgorod. This will reach the Khans’ ears, if not something is done!”

The Pope stayed silent for a while, fingers tapping lightly on the arm of his chair.

At last he spoke, slower now, and Dmitri heard something like weariness behind the authority.

“I am old,” the Pope said. “I have not seen any longer what thrives in our convents. I don’t myself visit these places. If this is true what you say… something indeed must be done. The places seem to be fallen into blasphemy.”

Dmitri’s shoulders loosened a fraction, relief mixing with dread. Belief was not the same as action.

The Pope turned his head and snapped an order to a servant.

“Summon the members of the Senate,” he said. “And call on Publius Aebutius.”

The servant bowed and hurried out.

Dmitri sat in a strange stillness, listening to the faint sound of distant footsteps and wondering whether he had just saved the west—or signed his own death warrant.

Hours passed.

Then men arrived—officials in fine cloaks, faces stern, eyes calculating. They filed into the Pope’s chamber like a council of creditors. The Pope spoke to them quietly at first, then more forcefully, describing the matter as a threat not merely to morals, but to order.

The cult was declared a threat to the security of the state.

Investigators were appointed. Rewards were offered to informants. Legal processes were put in place. The Senate began the official suppression of the cult throughout Italy—swift, methodical, cold .

The stated penalty for leadership was death .

In the coming months, events began to evolve as if a hidden machine had been turned.

People were arrested. Some were executed quickly. Nuns were expelled from monasteries and thrown into dungeons. Cult leaders were beheaded on public squares. Entire houses were sealed, inventories made, witnesses dragged into rooms and forced to speak. Dmitri heard later that the numbers were enormous—thousands caught up in it .

And then came the decree.

The Pope himself, together with the Senate, issued what the scribes titled:

Senate Decree on the Bacchanals — *Senatus consultum de Bacchanalibus* .

It was written in formal, legal language, meant to be carved on metal and displayed so no one could claim ignorance—exactly as the old records said such edicts were sent out and posted publicly .

The clerk read it aloud in the chamber, and Dmitri listened as if hearing an execution bell:

“The consuls Quintus Marcius, son of Lucius, and Spurius Postumius, son of Lucius, consulted the Senate in the temple of Bellona on the Nones of October. Present were Marcus Claudius, son of Marcus, Lucius Valerius, son of Publius, and Quintus Minucius, son of Gaius.Concerning the Bacchanalia, they decreed that the following should be proclaimed to those who are allies: Let no one among them have a Bacchanal. If there are any who declare that it is necessary for them to have

a Bacchanal, let them come to the urban praetor at Rome, and when their words have been heard, let our Senate decide the matter, provided that no fewer than one hundred senators are present when the question is discussed.

Let no Roman citizen, nor anyone of Latin name, nor any ally, approach a Bacchanal, unless he has first presented himself to the urban praetor and, with the Senate's approval (provided that no fewer than one hundred senators are present when the matter is discussed), has received permission.It was further resolved that no priest, whether man or woman, should be a master, nor should any man or woman be appointed as master or deputy master; nor should anyone have a common fund; nor should anyone after this time conspire, assemble, make pledges, or enter into agreements with one another; nor should anyone give faith or swear oaths to one another in this matter.

Let no one perform sacred rites in secret; let no one perform rites in public or in private or outside the city, unless he has gone to the urban praetor and, with the Senate's approval (provided that no fewer than one hundred senators are present when the matter is discussed), the praetor has given permission.It was resolved that no more than five men and no more than three women should be present together at the rites, except with the approval of the urban praetor and the Senate, as is written above.This you shall proclaim in an assembly, at least three market-days in advance, and you shall see to it that they know the Senate's decision. Their decision was as follows: if there are any who have acted contrary to what is written above, it was resolved that capital punishment should be inflicted upon them. And that this should be engraved on a bronze tablet, the Senate deemed it right, and that you should order it to be set up where it can most easily be known. And that the Bacchanalia, if any exist, should be disbanded within ten days from the day this tablet is given to you, except in cases where something sacred is involved, as is written above."

Dmitri felt a strange, grim satisfaction—and then, immediately, a fear he had not expected.

Because the decree sounded like order.

And he had learned that when order moves like a blade, it cuts the guilty—and often the inconvenient.

When the council ended, the Pope dismissed the men with a tired motion. Then he turned back to Dmitri as if remembering he was still there.

"You did well to bring this matter to attention," the Pope said.

A servant placed a heavy payment into Dmitri's hands.

Dmitri wanted to refuse. He had refused coin from khans with the same instinct.

But nobody refused a Pope any more than they refused a Khan.

He bowed stiffly. "I serve the Empire."

The Pope's eyes narrowed, perhaps amused, perhaps warned. "Then serve it quietly."

Dmitri left the Lateran with his sword returned, coin weight heavy, and his mind louder than ever.

He had come to the west to deliver a book.

Instead he had lit a fuse.

And as he rode back toward the Vatican, he could not stop thinking of Benedictus's warning—and of the dark men who listened from corridors.

If they rewrite history, Dmitri thought, *they will also rewrite what I have just done.*

And in New Rome, he was no longer sure whether the greatest danger was the cult he had exposed… or the hands that would now use the decree for their own purposes.

A few months passed.

The Vatican monastery settled into a new, colder order—quieter corridors, fewer laughing voices, fewer soft footsteps at night. The city outside still breathed and traded and prayed, but something had tightened in it, like a belt pulled one notch too far.

Dmitri sat in his small room with his back against the wall, candle burning low on the table, and listened to the monastery's silence as if it were a confession.

Many nuns had been eliminated from this and other monasteries. Some were expelled. Some vanished into dungeons. Some names were simply no longer spoken at meals. The nun who had appeared at his door that night—offering herself as if it were an ordinary courtesy—had been arrested for blasphemy and thrown into a dungeon. Dmitri had heard it from a novice in a whisper, the way news travels when it is dangerous to speak aloud.

He did not feel joy about that. Only a grim, sour heaviness.

Because the thing that kept him awake was not the arrests, not even the executions.

It was a sentence.

A phrase from the decree that haunted his mind like a splinter under skin:

"Let no one perform sacred rites in secret; let no one perform rites in public or in private or outside the city, unless he has gone to the urban praetor and, with the Senate's approval (provided that no fewer than one hundred senators are present when the matter is discussed), the praetor has given permission."

Dmitri read it again in his memory, and again, and again.

Then the thought that had been circling for weeks finally hardened into a blade.

"I be damned," he whispered into the candlelight. "Yes… they forbade the cult rituals to the masses, all over Italy… but a clause was added that still the higher ups can perform it themselves."

He leaned forward, elbows on knees, eyes fixed on the small flame.

"They just need urban praetor and senate's approval and permission. This just means the ritual moves behind closed doors for the elite."

The realization made his stomach turn.

"Why would the pope make it this way?" Dmitri muttered, voice low and bitter. "I suspect the old man is not so clean himself."

He pictured the Pope’s chamber: the gold cup, the heavy coin pouches, the rings flashing on fat fingers. He pictured the Pope’s tired eyes and his sudden readiness to call “the Senate,” to produce an ancient-sounding decree as if it had been waiting in a drawer.

“He became afraid I will report it to the Khans and made a show of banning the ritual,” Dmitri said, bitterness rising, “but he had to keep it still available to the elite—meaning he himself is most probably participating in them behind closed doors.”

He exhaled sharply, almost a laugh without humor.

“The old man knew fairly well what was going on in these monasteries,” Dmitri whispered. “I bet he did.”

The candle guttered. Wax ran down like a slow tear.

Dmitri sat in silence a long time, then nodded to himself as if sealing a decision.

He would report the matter when back in Novgorod.

But he would not tell anyone he was going to do it.

He was far from home, and he was not invincible.

If the western elite, the head of church is corrupt, the body rots from the head, he thought. Yes, I have won at least partial victory over the Bacchic vileness cult, but the matter is not settled yet…

He stood abruptly, needing movement to keep from choking on his own thoughts, and went down to the dining hall.

The dining hall was plain and colder than it had been months ago.

He took a bowl of porridge, a cup of cold milk, and some white bread. He gobbled it down hungrily, more out of habit than enjoyment—eating like a traveler even while sitting under a roof.

He was wiping his fingers when Benedictus entered.

Benedict’s face looked thinner than before, his eyes darker, as if the last months had aged him faster than the last ten years. He sat across from Dmitri without ceremony and lowered his voice immediately.

“Times of trouble are intensifying,” Benedict said.

Dmitri’s jaw tightened. “I feel it even in the corridors.”

Benedict nodded. “There are talks of troop movements from the east.”

“To suppress rebellion,” Dmitri said.

“Yes,” Benedict replied. “The western lands are boiling. People have been killed by villages. Knights ride into battle against Horde troops in the lands of Europa.”

Dmitri stared into his empty bowl. The porridge’s pale residue looked like ash.

“So it begins,” Dmitri said quietly.

Benedict's mouth twisted. "It has already begun. More and more battles are taking place—small now, but spreading. Local self-proclaimed kings are rising. They call themselves 'ancient rulers' as if a title makes them old."

Dmitri clenched his fist. "They forge history, then forge crowns."

Benedict leaned closer. "And they have help. Not always soldiers—scribes. Priests. Men who can turn ink into law."

Dmitri's mind flashed to the decree again—the convenient clause, the 'permission' loophole.

"Tell me," Dmitri said, voice low, "how many of those new kings kneel in churches that still perform rites behind locked doors?"

Benedict did not answer immediately. His silence was answer enough.

Dmitri swallowed. "This will not end well."

"It will end in blood," Benedict said plainly. "The east cannot allow the west to split. And the west cannot tolerate being reminded it was built yesterday."

Dmitri looked up. "Then the Empire will ride."

Benedict's eyes held his. "Yes. And when the Empire rides, it doesn't only punish rebels. It also creates new ones."

Dmitri breathed out slowly, feeling the weight of history settling again on his shoulders—history not as parchment, but as moving men with spears.

He touched the cross at his neck under his robe, not as prayer, but as reminder.

"Benedict," he said, "if I leave for Novgorod, will this book survive here?"

Benedict's gaze sharpened. "The true history?"

"Yes."

Benedict nodded once. "It will survive if I survive. And I will survive by doing what Rome hates most."

"What?" Dmitri asked.

Benedict's mouth tightened. "Staying silent. Copying quickly. Hiding deeper."

Dmitri gave a grim nod. "And I will survive by doing what the Pope fears most."

Benedict watched him carefully. "Which is?"

Dmitri's voice turned cold and steady.

"Remembering. And telling the east what I saw."

Benedict did not try to stop him. He only said, quietly, "Then choose your moment. In Rome, a man can be killed for less than a sentence."

Dmitri thought of shadows in corridors, of footsteps that vanished, of clauses written like hidden doors.

“I will choose it,” Dmitri said.

They sat in silence for a while, two monks in a western monastery, listening to the Empire’s far-off gears grinding toward war—knowing that soon roads would be full not only of traders and pilgrims, but of banners, steel, and rewritten histories riding side by side.

Dmitri twisted in his bed as if the straw beneath him had turned into thorns.

The monastery was quiet, but his mind wasn’t. It kept circling the same things—Benedict’s warnings, the loophole in the decree, the shadow in the corridor, the feeling that eyes listened from behind plaster.

Two hours passed without sleep.

At last, his eyelids grew heavy. The room softened. The edge of the world began to blur the way it always did right before surrender.

Then—

A creak.

So soft he might have imagined it, if his nerves weren’t sharpened to a blade.

His chamber door slowly opened.

Dmitri’s eyes snapped wide.

A shadowy figure in a black cloak slipped in. The hood was low. One hand held a dagger that caught a thin line of moonlight.

Dmitri didn’t breathe.

The figure lunged.

Dmitri rolled off the bed a heartbeat before steel struck where his throat had been. The dagger slammed into the mattress with a dull stab. Dmitri hit the floor hard, pain flashing in his ribs, and scrambled backward, reaching for the only things near—his night stand, his belt, anything.

The attacker yanked the dagger free and came again, fast and silent.

Dmitri kicked the small stool in the man’s path. The stool skidded and slowed the lunge by a fraction—enough. Dmitri grabbed his own dagger from the night stand, fingers closing around it with desperate certainty.

Steel met steel.

The cloaked man slashed for Dmitri’s face. Dmitri raised his forearm, felt the sting as the blade grazed his sleeve, then stabbed low toward the attacker’s belly. The man twisted aside—trained, not a drunken thief—and raked the dagger across Dmitri’s shoulder.

Warm blood ran under Dmitri’s robe.

They collided, grappling in the narrow space.

Dmitri smelled sweat and old smoke under the cloak. The attacker’s breath was controlled—no panic, only intent. He tried to push Dmitri down, to pin his arms, to end it quickly.

Dmitri’s left arm was still weaker from old wounds, but his grip was iron with fear. He twisted his hips, shoved hard, and drove both of them into the wall. The impact rattled the room. The attacker’s dagger hand wavered.

Dmitri struck.

He slammed his forehead into the hooded face—bone against bone. The attacker grunted, staggered half a step, and Dmitri took the opening like a starving man takes bread.

He plunged his dagger into the attacker’s side.

Once.

The man hissed—still not screaming.

He tried to stab Dmitri in return, wild now, the control cracking. Dmitri caught the wrist, forced it outward, and stabbed again, higher this time—under the ribs.

Twice.

The attacker’s strength faltered. The dagger slipped from his fingers and clattered on the floor.

Dmitri didn’t stop. He shoved the man down and drove the blade into him again—short, brutal thrusts—until the black cloak stopped fighting and became only weight and warmth leaking into the floorboards.

The hood sagged. The body twitched once, then went still.

Dmitri stood over him panting, dagger dripping.

His heart hammered like a war drum in his chest.

He waited for shouts, for alarms, for monks running down the corridor.

Nothing.

Only the monastery’s sleep—thick, indifferent, as if the building itself had decided not to notice.

Dmitri wiped the dagger on the attacker’s cloak and whispered, voice raw, “So they’ve come into the house itself.”

He understood instantly: it was not safe to stay.

Not one more night.

Not one more hour.

In the dark of night he moved like a thief.

He took what he could carry—food first. He slipped to the monastery kitchen, found dried fish, bread, a pouch of salt, and filled his waterskin. He took the wine skin too—full, heavy, precious. He wrapped it all in cloth, tied it tight, and kept his steps light.

He did not wake Benedictus.

Not because he didn’t trust him—but because if the monastery had eyes inside, even goodbye could become a rope around both their necks.

He reached the stables, saddled his horse with shaking hands, and rode out under the night sky without lamps, without blessing, without permission.

Back.

Back home.

To Novgorod.

He galloped for hours, cloak snapping behind him like a torn banner. He passed villages where people slept with doors barred and dreams ignorant of knives. Dogs barked once or twice, then quieted. The road swallowed him.

By morning he had reached an imperial road—wider, firmer, marked by posts with the double-headed eagle worn smooth by wind.

Two knights in full plate armor rode toward him and stopped him with practiced authority, their horses steady, their visors down.

“Who are you?” one demanded.

“And where are you going?” the other added.

Dmitri forced his breath to steady. He lowered his eyes respectfully, as a monk should, and chose a lie that tasted like ash.

“I am a traveling monk from Corna monastery,” he said smoothly. “Spreading the word of God to the villages.”

The knights watched him a moment longer than comfort allowed. One glanced at Dmitri’s hands—scarred, strong. The other looked at the bulk of his pack.

Then the first knight grunted. “Go. And keep to the main road.”

Dmitri bowed from the saddle. “May the Empire stand.”

They rode on. Dmitri waited until their armor glint faded behind a bend before he let out the breath he’d been holding.

He rode another hour, then stopped under an old tree whose branches threw a broad patch of shade.

He dismounted, hands still trembling slightly, and ate: dried fish and bread. He drank deep from the wine skin—too deep, but he needed the burning warmth in his throat to prove he was alive. He rested with his back against the trunk, watching summer sunlight flicker through leaves.

It was full summer now. Hot weather. Birds chirping. Sky blue and wide.

His horse nibbled at fresh green grass, tail flicking lazily, as if nothing in the world had ever tried to kill them.

Dmitri closed his eyes and let the calm hurt him.

I was foolish to think a monastery wall could protect me, he thought. *In the west, even holy stone has ears—and daggers.*

He touched the cross at his neck.

Novgorod, he told himself. *I must reach Novgorod. I must tell. Quietly. Correctly. Before they rewrite me too.*

He rose, mounted, and continued.

He rode through Cassonia and Eperies, the lands of Germania—long stretches of forest and meadow, river crossings where toll-men watched coins, hills where watchfires could be seen at night like small red eyes.

Weeks passed in road rhythm.

Some days he traveled among caravans and felt safer—wagons, guards, loud voices. Other days he rode alone through empty land where the only sound was hoofbeats and wind.

Once, a band of rough men watched him from a treeline, but did not approach when they saw his sword and the hard set of his eyes. Another time, a sudden summer storm broke over the road, drenching him in minutes; he sheltered under a rock overhang and listened to thunder roll like distant artillery.

At night he slept lightly, always with his dagger in hand. Every creak of branch made him wake. Every shadow seemed shaped like a hooded man.

And always, as he rode east, the thought stayed with him like a second rider in his saddle:

If they hunted me in Rome… they may hunt me all the way home.

Half a week later the land rose into mountains again.

Home

The road tightened, winding along rock shoulders and through stands of pine that smelled sharp in the sun. Dmitri pushed on until his horse needed rest, then guided it off the path onto a high place where the ground leveled and the view opened like a curtain pulled aside.

Below him lay a wide green valley—soft slopes dotted with trees, a ribbon of water glinting in the distance, fields and open grass that looked peaceful enough to belong in a hymn.

Dmitri dismounted and sat on a flat stone warmed by the sun.

He took out his water and some bread, ate slowly, and let the warm wind wash over his face. For a little while he allowed himself to simply look.

So much beauty, he thought, watching grass ripple like waves.

Time passed in quiet.

Then he noticed movement in the valley.

At first it was only a few riders appearing on the left side—small shapes emerging from behind a low hill. Then more. And more. Like ants gathering around a dropped crumb.

They kept coming.

Hundreds became thousands.

They formed into lines and blocks, banners rising above them: flags of different houses, painted coats of arms, colors and symbols that tried to make new authority look old. Their men wore mixed gear—leather armor, plate armor, shields with painted devices. Some carried long spears; others, swords and axes. Horses stamped and shifted, impatient.

Dmitri sat very still.

He had seen armies before—Horde camps, patrols, processions—but this was different. This was the west assembling its pride into a single fist.

An hour passed. The valley filled with them.

Dmitri's mouth went dry.

Then—on the far side—another movement began.

At first it was just a dark line, distant and steady, moving with a discipline that looked unnatural compared to the western clustering.

Then the banners became visible.

Yellow flags with a black double-headed eagle.

The Horde.

Not a camp. Not a patrol. An army.

Fifteen thousand—maybe twenty. Dmitri couldn't count properly from this height, but he could feel the mass of them in his chest. They advanced in ordered ranks, armor flashing in broken sunlight like a river of metal. Some units rode; others marched. Behind them rolled heavy shapes on wheels—cannons, hauled by teams, their dark mouths pointed forward like blunt proclamations.

Dmitri whispered without meaning to, "So it's true."

The east had come.

The warm wind carried faint sound upward—distant shouts, the creak of leather, the low murmur of thousands of men breathing together.

A massive horn was blown.

The note was deep enough to be felt, not just heard. It rolled across the valley and struck the western host like a thrown stone.

The western army answered—smaller horns, shouted commands, banners whipping as officers urged their men into line.

Then both forces began to move.

At first at a trot, then faster.

The west surged forward in uneven waves, eager, loud, chaotic with courage and fear mixed together. The Horde advanced like a wall that had decided to run—spears leveled in front, ranks

holding, horses aligned. Even at speed they looked controlled, as if each man knew his place as well as he knew his own name.

Dmitri stood now, bread forgotten in his hand.

They met in the middle of the valley.

The clash was like two storms colliding.

Spears punched into flesh. Horses screamed. Metal struck metal with a ringing that echoed up to Dmitri's perch. Men went down under hooves, trampled into the grass. The sound of it rose as a single roar—fear, rage, orders, prayer.

And then the cannons spoke.

A thundercrack ripped across the valley. Smoke blossomed in dark flowers. A second blast followed, and a third, and soon the air was full of rolling booms and drifting gray clouds. Dmitri saw gaps rip open in the western lines where iron had torn through bodies and shields. He saw riders thrown from saddles as if yanked by invisible hands.

The battle raged in full.

The western host fought fiercely—individual bravery everywhere, small groups charging, banners pressed forward again and again. But their energy scattered like water poured onto stone. They attacked as houses.

The Horde responded as an organism.

Units rotated. A line would hold, then withdraw behind a fresh line, leaving the west to crash against spears that never seemed to tire. Cavalry flanked with frightening precision, curling around like a noose tightening. Archers—if they were there—were invisible at this distance, but Dmitri saw men fall in ways that suggested shafts rather than blades.

Minutes became half an hour.

Dmitri watched densely, unable to look away.

The European coats-of-arms thinned.

First one banner vanished—dropped, swallowed by bodies. Then another. Then another. Clusters that had looked like proud houses became knots of men fighting back-to-back, then those knots became scattered individuals running, then those individuals fell.

The grass that had been green darkened in patches.

In less than an hour, it was over.

The last western riders tried to flee toward the left hills, but Horde cavalry rode them down without haste, as if finishing a task already decided.

Silence began to creep in between the remaining shouts.

The Horde stood victorious.

They had lost men too—Dmitri could see bodies in imperial armor lying in lines, horses wandering riderless, medics and attendants already moving among the fallen. A few thousand, perhaps, taken by steel and cannon and chance.

But the force remained intact—huge, disciplined, unbroken.

Invincible, it seemed, not because it was immortal, but because it could absorb loss without losing shape.

Dmitri felt conflicting things tear through him.

Pride, because this was the Empire he loved—order made flesh.

Horror, because he was watching that order spread through death.

A horn blew again—different tone, commanding.

Within an hour the Horde was already moving.

Ranks re-formed. Wounded were gathered. Cannons were hitched again. Banners lifted, yellow cloth snapping in the wind as if pleased.

The great army flowed out of the valley and deeper into Europa.

More battles to come.

More blood to spill.

More order to spread.

Dmitri stood on the mountain ledge, small as an insect above the field, and whispered to the wind:

“This is what they’re doing while scribes rewrite history.”

He watched until the last eagle banner disappeared beyond the far ridge—then he turned back to the road, knowing that the Empire’s war was now moving around him like weather.

And that getting home to Novgorod—alive, with truth in his mouth—had just become even more dangerous.

Weeks of road turned into something Dmitri could finally recognize.

The forests changed smell first—less damp western rot, more northern resin and river wind. The villages began to look familiar: heavier timber, steeper roofs, icons set above doorways, people speaking the empire tongue with the old Novgorod cadence. The road markers carried the same worn cuts he remembered, the same hands of the east.

Home.

Not yet reached, but close enough to feel in the bones.

Dmitri rode harder the last days, as if distance itself might change its mind and grow again if he slowed. He slept little, ate on the saddle, and watched the horizon like a starving man watches bread.

And then—Novgorod the Great.

Its walls rose from the land like the edge of a remembered dream. The bell towers, the broad streets of stone, the familiar smell of river water and smoke and wax. Even the wind felt different—colder, sharper, honest.

Dmitri rode through the gate, and something in his chest unclenched so suddenly it hurt.

He went straight to the monastery.

As soon as the brothers saw him, it was as if the building itself woke up. Sandals slapped the corridor floors. Faces appeared at doors. A novice dropped a bundle of kindling in shock.

“Brother Dmitri?” someone breathed, as if testing whether the name was real.

Then they rushed him—hands on his shoulders, questions spilling out like water from a broken bucket.

“Where have you been?”

“We thought you died!”

“It’s been—how long—?”

“A year? Two?”

Dmitri dismounted in the yard, stiff and dusty, and looked at the faces he knew by heart.

“Almost two years,” he said hoarsely.

A monk with a round face and gray beard—Brother Pavel—stared at him as if seeing a ghost. “It is I.352,” Pavel said quietly, almost accusingly. “Where have you been since I.350?”

Dmitri swallowed. “Given tasks,” he said. “One after another. Orders do not ask whether a man is tired.”

They ushered him inside like a relic recovered from a battlefield, gave him water, gave him bread, tried to talk over each other.

Dmitri endured the greetings, then raised a hand.

“I must see Father Vitali,” he said.

That hushed them immediately.

They knew that tone.

Abbot Vitali received him in the office chamber where Dmitri had once been a younger man with clean hands and a whole life ahead of him.

Vitali had aged. His beard was whiter. His face had deepened into harder lines, as if the monastery itself had been grinding him like grain. But his eyes were the same—steady, sharp, dangerous when needed.

Dmitri bowed low. “Father.”

Vitali gestured to the bench. “Sit.”

Dmitri sat, hands clasped, and began to report.

Not everything—some truths were too strange to be said loudly. But enough.

He spoke of New Rome—of the west's rot behind "holy" walls, of the Bacchic cult wearing church clothing, of masks and rites and secret corridors. He spoke of the decree, and the clause that allowed the elite to keep what the masses were forbidden. He spoke of the Pope's wealth and the suspicion that the old man's hands were not clean.

Vitali listened without interrupting, face growing grimmer with each sentence.

When Dmitri finished, the abbot sat in silence for a long moment, as if weighing whether anger would be useful or merely satisfying.

Then Vitali said, very quietly, "Those vile vipers of the West."

He stood, took out a parchment, and began writing at once.

Dmitri watched the quill move—fast, practiced strokes. The letter formed like a weapon being forged. Vitali's jaw worked as he wrote, the muscle tightening.

When he finished, he folded the parchment, sealed it with wax, and pressed the monastery mark into it with a hard final motion.

He opened the door and called sharply, "Brother Semyon!"

A monk appeared immediately.

Vitali held out the sealed letter. "Take this to the Khan of Novgorod at once."

Semyon bowed, eyes widening slightly at the urgency. "Yes, Father."

He took the letter and hurried away.

Vitali turned back to Dmitri, his expression still grim but now carrying something like approval.

"You have served the Empire," he said.

Dmitri bowed again. "I did what was ordered."

Vitali's gaze held him. "The Khans will hear about it."

Dmitri felt a small, tired relief.

Then he whispered a prayer—not to heaven, but to the order that had shaped his whole life.

"Great is the Empire," he murmured. "May its memory not be broken."

Vitali made a small sign—dismissal, blessing, or both.

"Go," he said. "Rest."

Dmitri returned to his old room in the back wing of the monastery.

The cell smelled the same—wood and wax and old cloth. The shelf was where it had always been. The floorboards creaked in the same familiar places. He sat on the bed for a long time, not moving, letting the reality of being home seep into him slowly.

Then he rose.

He went to the monastery library.

The tall dusty shelves greeted him like silent witnesses. Candlelight pooled on the desks. The scratching of quills sounded like rain on leaves.

Dmitri selected a fresh, clean, empty book—new boards, untouched pages, a blank mouth waiting to be filled.

He carried it to a table, lit a candle, dipped the quill, and began.

He wrote the true history.

What he had learned on his travels—Jerusalem/Constantinopol as the heart-city, the abyss under the Temple, the demon hierarchies whispered in black tomes, the empire's machine knowledge, the Khans of Siberia, the west's treachery, the Bacchic "church," the battles in Europa, the shadowy figures hunting books on roads and in monasteries.

He wrote not like a monk copying, but like a man preserving his own living witness.

He sat for long hours and scribed.

Day after day.

Season after season.

By the time a full year passed, the book was complete.

And Dmitri did not place it on the library shelf.

Not in these days.

Not with shadowy figures lurking in monasteries and cities, watching for the history of old to steal and burn and hide.

One night, when the monastery slept, he carried the finished book back to his cell, knelt, and pried up the floorboard he knew was loosest.

He slid the manuscript beneath.

Then he replaced the wood and pressed it down until it fit perfectly, leaving no sign.

He sat back on his heels, candle flickering, and let himself breathe.

Outside, the Empire continued—wide, loud, dangerous.

Inside, under one quiet floorboard in Novgorod the Great, the true history waited—hidden, patient, and alive.